

DUNGEONS & DRAGONS®

FORGOTTEN REALMS®



TIM PRATT

VENOM IN HER VEINS





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IN HER
VEINS



Product Description

Child of prophecy? Harbinger of Doom

Zaltys is a girl like any other to grow up ranging the jungles of the Southern Lluirwood. She's a crack shot with a bow and no stranger to the dangers that lurk beneath the deep forest canopy.

On expedition with her family to harvest the forbidden terazul flower, a powerful drug that has gathered many a dreamer into its narcotic embrace, Zaltys is about to unearth a truth long buried by the feculent loam of deception.

As the veil is lifted on the world Zaltys thought she knew, a pathway to the Underdark promises the answers her family never gave. Venturing forth in search of truth, Zaltys finds betrayal to be a much easier quarry. But it will take more than a lode of lies to quell the venom in her veins.

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VENOM IN HER VEINS

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Published by Wizards of the Coast LLC. Hasbro SA, represented by Hasbro Europe, Stockley Park, UB11 1AZ. UK.

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Cover art by: Raymond Swanland

eISBN: 978-0-7869-5996-9

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DEDICATION

For Millard, Matt, and Bobby.

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CHAPTER ONE

SCITHERON SLITHERED AWAY FROM THE FEEDING PIT, hands bloodied with the remnants of the pre-dawn sacrifice. The segments of his lower body, a serpent's tail the thickness of a tree trunk, compressed and expanded, propelling him along the worn path through the ruined temples of the settlement, a forgotten outpost that was once the thriving heart of his sect. The stench of the anathema's pit still clung to Scitheron's forked tongue, no matter how fiercely he flickered it, and he thought, not for the first time, that the community would be best served by sending down a sacrifice liberally laced with poison some morning, to put everyone in the settlement out of the anathema's misery, and allow them to relocate to one of the serpentfolk settlements rumored to thrive in the deeper jungle.

But such thoughts were blasphemy. Scitheron's people worshiped the god Zehir, and though much diminished, his cult still cared for the last of Zehir's chosen ones, the anathema who writhed, multiform and mad, in the pit overseen by Scitheron and the other remaining priests. The yuan-ti deeper in the jungle were devotees of the old god Sseth, the fools. Scitheron would rather die a true believer of Zehir than go over to their ancient, withered faith.

The malison guards at the entry to the main settlement nodded as he approached, their rusty scimitars hanging uselessly at their belts. Both had proud heads of serpents, but one had two legs like an ape, something that reminded Scitheron of the other task he had to carry out that night. There are so few of us now, he thought, it seems wrong to kill a potential warrior for Zehir while she's still a babe, but it is the low priest's will.

"How does the god fare this night?" the two-legged guard said.

Scitheron made the sign of the fangs. "The anathema is not a god. His kind were kings and emperors once, before the madness ..." He shook his head. "The anathema is well. Quiet. I fed him three skinned apes, and he seemed sated. That should appease him until the sun rises over the horizon."

"Waste of good food if you ask me," Two Legs began, but the other yuan-ti guard slapped him on the side of the head hard enough to make Two Legs stumble.

"Blasphemer," he muttered, and gave a slight bow to Scitheron. "He is young, and stupid. I would understand if you must tell the low priest of his transgression."

At the mention of the priest, Two Legs clutched the hilt of his scimitar and began flickering his tongue wildly.

"That won't be necessary," Scitheron said. "This time. But Zehir hears all, half-ape. Remember that." He could have had the guard executed, but they couldn't spare an able-bodied snakeman, especially for so mild a blasphemy. Seeing the guard suitably chastened, Scitheron continued through the remnant of the walls, to find almost the entire population of the settlement gathered in a plaza, sharing a communal breakfast of whatever the elite abomination hunters—all three of them—had been able to gather in the forest. Once the abominations had been the shock forces of their sect, armed with swords and grasping coils that could crush the life from any enemy. But those left were a sad remnant.

"Scitheron." The low priest approached, pure-white scales making her seem eerily ghostlike in the morning light. "Your chores are complete?"

"Yes, most low."

"Good, good." The low priest touched his shoulder and guided him to a corner of the courtyard, beneath the weathered remains of a statue that Scitheron, to his shame, could not begin to identify. The low priest looked around at the assembled crowd, only a few dozen yuan-ti, not even a stable breeding population, truth be told. Some

years before, a group had gone in search of another branch of their sect, rumored to thrive in the east, but they had never returned. Either they'd found a better life and chosen not to share it, or, more likely, they'd been taken by any of the myriad predators that lurked among the trees. The settlement was ultimately doomed, with fewer and fewer eggs laid by the females every year, and fewer of the children surviving to adulthood. Every life there was precious, every snakeman willing to die—or, for preference, kill—for the glory of the Great Serpent, Master of Poisons and Shadows, their god Zehir. Which was why Scitheron hoped the low priest wouldn't bring up—

“The child,” the low priest said. “You will see that she is disposed of?”

“If that is your will,” he said, but the low priest cut him off.

“It is the will of your god.”

Scitheron bowed his head. He had not, himself, had a vision of Zehir for many years, though he sometimes sensed the presence of the great one while the anathema fed its thousand mouths in the pit during evening sacrifice. He wondered if the low priest truly had direct communication with the god, or if she was just fulfilling her own whims. But asking a question like that was a greater blasphemy than asking whether good food should be thrown to a seemingly mindless creature in a pit because tradition dictated it must be done. Still, Scitheron could try again. “Such creatures can be useful, most low. Within your own long life you have seen a yuan-ti born with a semblance almost human. You remember old Iraska? She came from the same family line as this new child, and in the time of our grand-broods Iraska was sent as an agent to the city in secret. The low priest before you said her birth was a great omen, that such creatures are marked by destiny, to further the goals of our god. Iraska posed as human among those who would persecute the serpentfolk for our faith, and she rose most high in their debased society. I saw her once when I was young, and I'm sure you did too. This new girl child may not be a sign of decline—

she could be a useful tool, indeed, her birth may even be interpreted as a sign of the god's favor—"

The priest shook her noble head. "Old Iraska disappeared long ago, taken by things in the jungle after she returned from her mission in disgrace. Most of those living here never knew Iraska at all, and would gag at the thought of a yuan-ti indistinguishable from an *ape*. But even if you're right, if this child could be used as a spy—do you imagine we have any need for a spy among the humans anymore? The nearest city of any size is Delzimmer, and to reach it requires an arduous journey through treacherous jungle and over barren plains. How would we use such an infiltrator? Would we send her to their market to buy food for us? How would she bring it back?" The low priest moved closer. "And how would she learn the ways of humans? The last human cultist dedicated to our cause died in my grandmother's time." The low priest paused. "As I recall, the anathema ate him. Which did little to win other humans to our cause."

"We could foster her in a human village, perhaps," Scitheron said. "Or even leave her for the caravan that passes near sometimes. If we left her near their camp, they might find her, and raise her, and ..." He trailed off at the look of disgust on the low priest's face.

"Let her believe herself human? No. Better to kill her—which is what the humans would do when they realized her true nature anyway. She is a freak, Scitheron. A sport. She turns her face away from meals of meat, and her weak ape's mouth is good only for suckling. She doesn't even have *teeth*. She can only feed by slurping blood from a cloth." The low priest shuddered. "Perhaps, in the old times, they knew what to do with such creatures, knew how to raise them, but life is harder here. Her birth has been seen as an ill omen since her egg first cracked open. The people mutter that Zehir has turned his back on us, that our serpent nature is being withheld, that *all* our children will be ape-faces from now on. The child's mother can barely stand to look upon the tiny thing, and who can blame her, when her other children are already slithering about,

foraging for their own food? The occasional two-legs can be useful, they can run and climb better than some others, but this girl has barely any serpent nature. No. For the good of the settlement, she must die. At least she will serve as a meal of the anathema. And I'll have no more of this talk of *destiny*. We are barely surviving, hardly able to maintain our devotions to Zehir. I can't have you stirring up discord and false hope among the others. Or questioning me either. The anathema is not above eating blasphemers, as you well know."

Scitheron bowed his head. "As you will, most low. I will make the sacrifice at the midday feeding."

"Mmm," the low priest said. "No. Better to do it now." She showed her fangs. "Not that I expect you to disobey—you have always been obedient—but I can see it troubles your mind. Finish the task then, and you can move on. Besides, it's an act for the shadows, as all gifts for Zehir must be."

Scitheron flickered his tongue in assent and slithered to one of the low buildings, a rare structure that still had portions of its roof. It was the nursery, where the youngest yuan-ti slithered and wrestled and twined, and where one child mewled and waved her brownish, soft, unscaled limbs around, gazing about her with disturbingly round-pupiled eyes in her strange flat face. He picked her up, and she cooed at him. Her skin, at least, was not as delectably warm as the furred creatures of the jungle—she resembled a human, apart from a few patches of scale here and there, but she still had a serpent's blood.

"Forgive me, child," he said. "Forgive me, Zehir." Cradling the girl in his arms, he emerged from the low building and slithered across the plaza toward the pit of their sole remaining anathema, the last living god-touched member of their sect. The other yuan-ti watched him as he went, some making the sign of the fangs when he passed.

Scitheron was halfway to the pit when he heard the screams. They were not the screams of his people—who were, anyway, not screamers by nature, preferring to do even their dying in silence—

but the screams of attacking warriors. He almost dropped the child in his fright, but he kept her close to his underbelly as he slithered quietly back toward the plaza. He called on his god's power to drape him in a clinging shadow to hide him from enemies, and peered from the jungle's growth.

Horrors had descended on the plaza. Humanoids, most shorter than Scitheron, wearing black leather armor. Their flesh, where it showed, was as pale as the underside of poisonous mushrooms. They cackled as they swung their war picks, the harvesters among them wielding magical black iron shackles that wound around the limbs or tangled the coils of the yuan-ti who attempted to flee.

Derro, Scitheron thought.

The baby mewled, softly, and Scitheron covered her mouth with his hands. The invaders couldn't have heard the child's sound over the violence happening in the plaza, but if she cried out again, Scitheron would snap her tiny neck to preserve himself, child of destiny or no. The derro were one of the most feared races of the Underdark, which meant the sinkhole that had opened in the floor of the main temple a few days before was more than merely an accident of nature—it was a breach point, allowing insane horrors from the depths to attack in their midst.

The abomination guards had fought back, and they lay dead on the stones of the courtyard. The settlement's lone cobra striker spat venom in the face of one of the slavers, the enemy's flesh melting away, but the attacker only cackled wildly and lashed out with its club. Derro were insane, tainted by their association with aberrant creatures and their devotion to the outer horrors of the so-called Far Realm, where madness was sanity and reality ran like melting wax. Another derro unleashed bolts from a small, lethal repeating crossbow into the striker's flared cobra hood and scaled throat, felling the brave warrior. For the most part, though, the derro didn't kill—they weren't there for murder. They were there for slaves, and indeed, many of the harvesters were already dragging away writhing prisoners. The only ones dead were the guards, the

abominations, the striker, and the low priest, who had attempted to call on the power of Zehir to protect the settlement, with some success, as the crushed bodies of a few derro around her attested. But it hadn't been enough, and crossbow bolts had pierced her in a dozen places, cold blood oozing onto the stones.

The battle, such as it was, wound down. Some of the more thuggish derro, armed only with clubs, gathered up their dead, and the bodies of the fallen yuan-ti too. Of course, Scitheron thought sourly. Why leave good meat for the jungle beasts?

There was only one hope. It wasn't *much* of a hope. But he could go back and free the anathema from its pit. The god-king was mad, but it still had some connection to Zehir, and perhaps some vestige of loyalty to its people would lead it to strike against the derro? The tales of anathema in battle were legendary, and some of their crumbling frescoes depicted such clashes in gloriously gory detail.

Scitheron could move faster without a mewling infant in his arms. And if the anathema didn't help him, if he ate him instead, this ape-faced girl might be the last remnant of this particular sect of the serpentfolk. Not that she was likely to survive on her own, among the jungle creatures, but he'd do what he could. He set her gently behind a pillar and covered her in a scattering of broad leaves. She cooed at him again, her eyes bright, her limbs waving uselessly.

This errand might be useless too, but it was the best he could do.

Scitheron approached the pit, but stopped before he reached the great barred roof that covered the anathema's prison and lair. Voices were speaking, in the guttural tones of Deep Speech, the language of the dwellers below the earth. Scitheron knew some words in that tongue, and thought he heard "treasure" and "king."

Well, the anathema was something of a treasure, and something of a king, but—

A derro screamed, and Scitheron smiled. The foolish slaver must have lifted the trapdoor that opened into the pit, where sacrifices were given, and become a sacrifice himself. Scitheron slithered

closer, and saw one of the derro gazing down into the pit, where, by the sound of things, his fellow was being messily devoured. Scitheron had no weapon, but he was a cleric of Zehir, and he raised his hands to call the power of his god to rack the remaining derro with the pain of a thousand coursing venoms.

Before he could speak the dark prayer, another derro lunged into his vision, cackling, white hair caked with blood, a war pick in one hand and a set of shackles in the other.

Scitheron prayed for death, but Zehir did not oblige him, and he was beaten to the ground, bound, and dragged away. One of his eyes was swollen shut, but with the other, he watched as a derro opened its filthy breeches and pissed a stream down into the anathema's pit, cackling all the while, and then slammed the trapdoor shut.

So ends this holdfast of the faith, Scitheron thought. The only one of his people left—apart from the trapped anathema—was the girl child, and she would almost certainly be killed by some passing jungle beast before the sun reached the crown of the sky. So Zehir wills, he thought, and saw the faint hint of sunlight touch the sky just before the derro dragged him through the door of the temple to the yawning pit in the floor that led into the devouring darkness.

Before they threw him into the shallowest part of the Underdark, he thought he heard, faintly, the child's long and lonely cry.

CHAPTER TWO

THE GATHERING PARTY WAS COLLECTING BLOSSOMS IN THE first blush of dawn's light when they heard the child's cry—sharp, brief, and loud. Krailash frowned, and the three humans under his protection looked up from their work, eyes wide over the white cloth masks that covered their noses and mouths, heavily gloved hands pausing in their work. The dark blue flowers they picked, growing on lush green vines that thoroughly entwined the broken pillars and all the nearby trees, filled the air with their sweet, subtle scent as the women and their guards listened to the silence, and then the cry came again.

“That’s a *baby*,” one of the women said. “And hungry, by the sound.”

“Keep working,” Krailash said. The immense rust-colored dragonborn cocked his head and hefted his two-headed war axe. “I’ll investigate.”

“Could be a trap,” said Rainer, one of the guards under Krailash’s command. He sounded like he relished the prospect. Rainer was a capable fighter, and more importantly for his job, he looked menacing—he was unusually big for a human, with a scarred face and broad shoulders, and though he wasn’t a half-orc, Krailash thought he might be a quarter-orc, or at the very least had some orcish influence in his bloodline. Though Krailash made sure the guards under his command drilled and kept in shape, there was precious little actual fighting in the job, which could be difficult for men like Rainer, who thrilled to the impact of metal on metal—or, better yet, metal on flesh.

“And who would set this trap?” Krailash said. “The family’s business rivals? Hardly seems likely. If they were this close to the source of

the flowers, they wouldn't need a ruse. They'd already know everything they'd hoped to find out."

"I was thinking more about the locals," Rainer said. "We've all glimpsed yuan-ti in the ruins nearby."

Krailash shook his head. His voice was measured, and solid as the iron shield strapped to his back. "No one hates yuan-ti more than I do, or with better reason." He'd tried to bury the memories of his first time adventuring, young and eager, his scales still shining and unscarred, and the brave companions who'd set forth with him to seek treasure in an abandoned temple in a land beyond the jungle—a temple that, in fact, had been home to a vast tribe of yuan-ti and their fanatical Snaketongue cultists. One of Krailash's party had turned out to be a traitor, secretly a cultist working for the yuan-ti, who'd led them in as human sacrifices. Only Krailash had survived, and his loathing for the snakemen had only grown more profound over the years. But the few of that race who lurked in the jungle nearby were pitiful, half-starved things barely holding onto life. He said as much to Rainer. "These serpentfolk are broken remnants. Their numbers dwindle every year, and there weren't enough of them to be a threat a decade ago. They are mad cultists, devoted to feeding the monsters they venerate. When we come too close, they hide in what remain of their temples to Zehir." The dragonborn spat after speaking the snake-deity's name.

The child cried again. "That's no serpent spawn," Krailash said. "Sounds human to me." He'd heard the mewling of human children before, and something deep within his armored heart turned over at the sound. His adventuring days were behind him. For the past ten years and more he'd been a protector instead, and that cry was the sound of someone who needed protection. "There are a few human refugees and halfling tribes in the jungle," he said after a moment. "Though I know of none so close by. We shall see. Rainer, you and Marley come with me. The rest of you, watch the harvesters."

The young, jug-eared guard Marley swallowed but stepped forward. Rainer drew his sword and took the rear as Krailash pushed his way

through the jungle. At nearly seven feet tall, and weighing three hundred pounds, Krailash was not the largest or strongest thing in the jungle, but he was far from the smallest or weakest. After spending so many years on the caravan route, he knew the likeliest dangers well, and broke his trail with confidence, sweeping aside branches and vines with his axe. He paused whenever the child cried out, adjusting his direction as necessary. Sound carried strangely in the jungle, bouncing off the towering trees and occasional overgrown ruins of old halfling settlements and yuan-ti temples.

The wall of green parted before his axe, and a clearing was revealed: a broad courtyard of once neatly-jointed stones, long since jostled out of true by the slow motions of the earth and the growth of tree roots underneath. A squalling, naked child with skin the rich brown of new leather lay in the shadow of a pillar. The stone was carved with the likeness of some extinct jungle beast, eroded into a shape of vague menace by the weather of centuries. Fresh blood spotted the stones nearby, and there were other signs of recent violence: broken bits of weaponry, shreds of torn cloth, a few teeth scattered on cobblestones.

The child was naked, tipped on its back, limbs waving like an overturned turtle. Female. Krailash had always found the sight of human infants vaguely alarming. They were so helpless and needy—unlike dragonborn, who could walk and feed soon after emerging from the shell. They became self-sufficient in a few years. When Krailash's shadow fell across the girl child, shielding her from the sun, she quieted, and gazed up at him with wide eyes the same rich green as terazul leaves. If she found the sight of a seven-foot-tall rust-scaled humanoid dragon frightening, it didn't show—but for a child so young, everything was new, and most things were probably more interesting than frightening.

Rainer walked the perimeter of the courtyard, looking at the signs of battle, while Marley just swallowed and stared at the scattered

teeth, which were not human or dragonborn: they were long, needle shaped, and bloody at the roots.

“The blood’s not dried yet,” Rainer said, crouching to examine the stones. “You can see the undergrowth is broken there, people were dragged away.” He shook his head. “The yuan-ti must be better organized than you thought. Either they missed the child or didn’t think she was worth eating, or raising to be a slave, or sacrificing to their anathemas. The monsters left a trail as broad as a boulevard in Delzimmer, easy to follow ... Did you want to investigate?”

Krailash considered. He was philosophically opposed to slavery and the sacrifice of sentient creatures, and besides, this had happened rather too close to the trade route for his liking. Assessing potential dangers to the family trade was part of his job as head of security. If there were unusually bold yuan-ti—or something worse—operating here, it would be good for him to know. “I do.”

Rainer nodded. “What about the girl?”

“Marley will take her to Alaia. You and I will follow this trail.”

“Just us? Alone?”

Krailash showed his teeth. He’d been around humans long enough to learn how to smile. “Alone? Not at all. I’ll have my axe, and you’ll have me.”

Rainer picked up the child and thrust her at Marley, who took her as if she might be venomous. The infant squalled at first, then clutched at the front of the guard’s shirt and tried to gnaw one of his buttons. “She’s a tiny thing,” Rainer said. “Amazing she survived whatever happened here. I’d never want one of my own, of course, but I can see the appeal. Cute.” Rainer was almost as tall as Krailash and not far short of his weight, all of it battle-hardened muscle, so he could afford to speak sentimentally, whereas someone scrawny like Marley had to make a far greater show of toughness. Rainer touched the girl’s cheek. “She makes you feel ... protective, doesn’t she?”

Krailash nodded, though he knew his protective instinct sprang from a different source—he didn't find tiny apes *cute*, exactly, but he hated to see the harmless and the innocent endangered. "Step quickly, Marley, and be watchful. Tell Alaia we'll report back before nightfall—and if we don't, she should close ranks and move the caravan out." Krailash doubted the woman would obey, at least not readily. In theory, Krailash's word was absolute in matters of caravan security, but if he wasn't physically present to make sure Alaia listened, she might decide she knew better, and stay to harvest another day.

Hard to blame her, when a day spent gathering flowers would eventually translate to enough gold to buy a small house in town or a large farm in the country.

Marley nodded and set off, the infant nuzzled against him, chin resting on his shoulder. The child's green eyes seemed to look straight at Krailash, but it was surely coincidence—as he understood it, infant humans were appallingly nearsighted, lacking the keen vision every dragonborn had at birth, lost in a world of blurs and light.

"After you," Rainer said, and Krailash grunted, looking away from the child to the path broken in the jungle brush. He walked slowly, axe in his hands, trying to make sense of the trail sign, but he was no ranger. Should have called for the head of the caravan scouts. All he could tell was that a great many people had passed this way, some resisting that passage violently. The path was big enough for Rainer to walk beside him, and they moved in silence for a long distance, the jungle gradually closing back over them from the relative openness around the ruined courtyard. Whoever had attacked the child's tribe hadn't attempted to cover the tracks of their departure at all, which suggested either stupidity or confidence.

Rainer tripped over a stone and swore. That stone was the first of many—they were back in the ruins, among the rubble and fragments of vine-encrusted walls. Colorful snakes slithered away

from the path as they approached, which could mean there were yuan-ti nearby—the serpentfolk tended to attract snakes—or it could mean nothing at all. The jungle was full of slithering things.

The path was harder to follow in the ruins, since there was no longer a pathway of broken and crushed vegetation, but some of the prisoners had been bleeding, and spots of blood left something of a trail. They picked their way over the stones and over broken bits of statuary until they reached a relatively intact wall that butted up against a huge doorway: two massive, weathered stone slabs standing upright, with a third slab laid across the top. The structure still had a roof, though it was damaged and pocked with gaping holes. Anything could be waiting inside.

“Well,” Rainer said, voice pitched low. “Do we go in?”

Krailash listened intently, but didn’t hear any signs of life inside. He knew from bitter experience that prisoners, even cowed ones, weren’t usually silent—there were sobs, whimpers from injuries, fierce whispers. “I will go in,” he said at last. “You wait here, to make sure no one ambushes us from outside.”

“Yes sir.” Rainer lifted his sword, a tight grin on his face.

Krailash stepped through an archway wide enough that he couldn’t have touched both sides with his arms out-retched, and into what might once have been a temple. The carvings on the wall were relatively well-preserved, and they looked like the work of yuan-ti, all twining serpents and fangs and a many-headed snake he recognized as one aspect of Zehir, a god of poison, darkness, and treachery. Krailash, like most dragonborn, valued honor above all else, and this vile deity of the snakemen was abhorrent to him. He was glad their settlement had crumbled so far, but sorry they still persisted at all.

He took a step forward, eyes adjusting to the dimness just in time to stop him from plunging into the pit that filled the center of the temple.

At first, Krailash assumed the ten-foot-wide hole was part of some dark ceremonial function of the yuan-ti temple, who were said to keep pits of snakes and to hold their venerated monsters underground to receive sacrifices, but a moment of study showed him the chasm in the floor was actually evidence of some catastrophe. The edges were cracked and ragged, stones heaved up and statuary toppled on the edges, with only impenetrable darkness within. Was it a sinkhole, or ...?

No. There was a single bright drop of blood on the edge of the pit. The prisoners had been led here and taken down into the dark. Perhaps not yuan-ti slavers at all, then, but something worse: some subterranean dwellers from the Underdark, the vast system of caverns, tunnels, lightless seas, underground rivers, and hidden cities that legend said formed a savage world *beneath* the world. Yuan-ti certainly weren't the only creatures with fangs in their mouths. Krailash shivered. Despite his reptilian appearance, he was as warm-blooded as any human, and the thought of innocents dragged into those lightless depths by savage drow, or brutish kuo-toa, or fouler races he'd never heard of, chilled his blood and troubled his heart.

Well. He wouldn't be going down *there*. But he could do something about this particular doorway to the depths—

He heard something from outside, a dull thud that could have been a falling stone from the ruins, or something more ominous. "Rainer!" he shouted, and then looked uneasily at the hole in the floor, wondering if his voice would call attention to whatever lived within. The other guard didn't answer, and Krailash hurried for the entryway, emerging into the light to find Rainer gone, his sword on the ground. A faint shout gave him a direction to follow, and he ran deeper around the side of the temple where he found another crack in the earth, this one smaller, but opening on the same black depths. Rainer's helmet rested, upside-down, on the edge of the pit.

Whatever had stolen the child's village away had stolen Rainer too. And it was Krailash's fault for coming alone, and not bringing sufficient support. He considered leaping into the dark, roaring and swinging his axe, but Rainer had been a capable fighter too, and that hadn't helped him. The enemy could be using poison, traps, ambush, anything. Rainer's loss was a blow, but the safety of the caravan was paramount. With a last look around—the jungle could hide almost anything—Krailash set off for the caravan at a run. He needed help to neutralize this threat.

Loath as he was to admit it, he needed magic. Magic could accomplish in moments what it would take twenty men with shovels and picks a tenday to do.

CHAPTER THREE

KRAILASH STOPPED BY THE HARVESTING OPERATION TO assuage his worry that the whole party had been kidnapped by dwellers from the Underdark, but everything there was business as usual, the workers carefully plucking petals from the terrible, beautiful flowers and putting them away in baskets. “Where are Rainer and Marley?” one of the guards asked, but Krailash ignored him, barked orders to pull the harvesting detail back to the caravan, and led the way. The trip to the camp didn’t take long, but to Krailash, it felt like the march of a thousand miles through hostile territory in wartime. When they reached the camp, he finally allowed himself a deep exhalation of relief. The perimeter was marked with wooden posts topped by faintly-pulsing purple and red crystals that their wizard, Quelamia, assured him would keep the mindless jungle beasts away, and his sentries were on the lookout for other dangers. Krailash hurried past the paddock where the oxen were contentedly munching their feed and producing copious quantities of manure—fortunately upwind of the camp proper—and hailed his guardsmen. “Tell Alaia I need a moment of her time,” Krailash said, and a messenger dashed away.

The war-wagons were arrayed in the camp’s outer ring, with bowmen on guard in each, and four of Quelamia’s apprentices spread out, each armed with a rod enchanted to throw fireballs or spit lightning or spawn freezing winds. Inside the defensive ring were the tents of the soldiers, and inside that, those of the laborers and the cook wagons. At the very center stood three wagons that were, essentially, houses on wheels. The smallest was Krailash’s, an unassuming wooden box on wheels with arrowslit windows; the armor reinforcements didn’t show.

Beside it, like a tropical bird perched next to a drab sparrow, rested Quelamia's wagon, more a sculpture than a dwelling, made of living wood from the Feywild. Where Krailash's quarters were all squares and angles, Quelamia's looked more or less like a live tree somehow growing impossibly on a wheeled platform, complete with leafy branches that sometimes bore strange fruit. No ox ever pulled her cart: it moved under its own powers, immense wheels rolling smoothly over even uneven terrain, branches swaying. Trust a wizard to make a home in such a strange whimsy.

The final wheeled home was even more impressive, in its way, since it had been made by wealth, not magic. The wagon had the look of a cozy cottage, made of rare kopak wood—strong, flexible, and the color of sunlight streaming through jasmine honey—joined seamlessly and shaped by a master craftsman, with decorative carvings around the door and roofline. The windows were made of real glass, and there was even a working fireplace and chimney, as if anyone needed heat in the jungle. The front door swung wide when Krailash approached, and Alaia herself stood in the doorway, holding the now-sleeping infant child in her arms. Her hair was long and black, and though Krailash was no judge of human beauty, he'd heard it said Alaia was attractive, in a severe and aloof way. Certainly her blue eyes seemed to hold humor and strength in careful balance: she was seldom angry, never acted in haste, and nothing could sway her from her course once she'd chosen it.

Those were exceptionally good character traits for a merchant princess of the Serrat family. Krailash had never thought of his employer as *motherly*, but she held the child as comfortably as if it were her own. "Come in," she said, standing aside, and Krailash entered her home.

The interior might have been a room from a lavish country estate, but if one looked closely, one could see the small efficiencies and precautions: tables that folded up into the wall to stay out of the way, furniture fixed in place on the floor, shelves and cupboards that could be secured to prevent the contents spilling on bumpy

roads, magical lights instead of candles—because magical lights couldn't fall over and catch the carriage on fire. A few of the lady's small carved totems stood on shelves, looking merely decorative to the untrained eye, but allowing Alaia easier access to her vast shamanic powers if the caravan were ever directly threatened.

Alaia shut the door behind them and sat in her customary armchair, gesturing for Krailash to sit on the ironwood bench—the one utilitarian piece of furniture in the place, simple and strong, kept just for him.

“Tell me about this,” she said, looking down at the infant.

So Krailash told her: the child's cry, the sounds of violence, the ruined temple, the opening to the Underdark, the disappearance of Rainer. She took it all in silently, then said, “Do you think we're in danger?”

Krailash nodded. “Of course I do. Thinking we're in danger is my *job*. But we are ... rather formidable. My guards, combined with Quelamia's magic, make us a difficult target. But they seized one of my men, and we have to assume they'll interrogate him and find out the details of our defenses. I don't know what they'll do with that information, though. Attack us, or leave well enough alone? The problem is, the enemy is unknown, in kind and in motivation. Are they slavers? Devotees of some mad god? Are they drow? Duergar? The Underdark is vast, home to countless races, and I don't know enough about the place to separate the stories I've heard from truth. I have to assume the danger is real. That we could be attacked, and overwhelmed, and all of us dragged into the dark.”

“What do you propose?” Alaia said. “This is the best place for the terazul harvest. The secondary and tertiary sites are less fruitful, and not really far enough away to make a difference anyway. I'm loath to leave, and what—never come back?”

“That's precisely what I advise.”

“And if I reject that advice?” A small smile touched her lips. “As you know I'm inclined to do?”

“An overwhelming show of force,” Krailash said. “To shut off this particular passageway to the surface, and show them we’re not to be trifled with.”

“Mmm,” Alaia said. “You’ll want Quelamia.”

“I will.”

“She gave up being a war wizard before I was born. She won’t like it.”

Krailash shrugged. The question of liking, or not liking, a particular chore seemed irrelevant to him. Duty was duty. One did what was necessary. “She has the power, though. She doesn’t often need to use it, but she can.”

“Oh, yes. The family pays her for what she *can* do, as much as we pay her for what she actually *does*. All right. Tell her I’ve agreed.”

Krailash stood, then hesitated. He nodded at the child. “What will you do with ...” He almost said “it,” but Alaia had an unusual look of tenderness in her gaze as she looked at the infant, so he said “... her?”

“Ah, that’s the question, isn’t it? You know, there are factions in the family that want to see me married off and bearing children, before I get too old. Of course, some of them mutter that I’m too old already. But this little one ... Well, it sounds like all her people are dead or, at least, lost. We have some obligation to care for her. Assuming she’s healthy and otherwise sound, I thought I might adopt her.”

Krailash nodded slowly. That wasn’t unheard of in Alaia’s family, and usually happened a few times every generation. The family *was* the business, and among the Serrats of Delzimmer, marriages were made carefully, for maximum tactical and financial advantage, but over the generations they had occasionally adopted orphans and foundlings, on the theory that such outside additions kept the bloodline fresh. There was no particular risk in the practice. If the adoptees proved profligate or unreliable or otherwise unsuitable to

business, it was no matter—they were shunted into some irrelevant side-channel of the family’s sprawling enterprises and given an allowance sufficient to keep them occupied. No one became fully vested in the family, given voting power or a percentage of the family profits, until they’d reached at least their late teens and proven themselves responsible and worthy, or proven themselves suitable only for irrelevant work or, in extreme cases, exile from the family. “I see. Would you want to train her in the business side of things, or the more, ah, practical aspects?”

“Will you be forced to teach her to swing a sword, you mean?” Alaia smiled. “She’s not dragonborn, Krailash, we humans don’t develop that quickly—we’ve got years to see where her aptitudes lie, if anywhere at all. That’s all assuming she survives. I worry about this. I think it’s a rash? What do you think?” She unwrapped the blanket carefully, and beckoned Krailash. He had no particular desire to closely examine the skin diseases of a human child, but he did as she bid him, squinting at the tiny creature, who sighed as Alaia turned her over.

There was a patch of greenish flesh in the small of the child’s back, vaguely diamond-shaped. It might have been a birthmark, except it was raised, and rough to the touch. “It looks like ...”

“Scales,” Alaia said. “Just like scales. Isn’t that odd? I’ve heard of all manner of jungle diseases, but never one that turned flesh *scaly*. There’s a terrible disease, where people are born with thick, scaly flesh, almost crocodilian, but other birth defects always come along with it—facial deformities and the like. This child appears perfectly ordinary and healthy otherwise, except ... it’s the oddest thing ... she doesn’t appear to have a navel. Her belly’s all smooth. Isn’t that strange?”

“I never saw the need for a bellybutton,” Krailash rumbled.

“We humans do. Though if she were born premature, the navel might be very small, perhaps there’s a tiny depression after all. But, really, I’m less concerned about the absence of something ordinary

than the presence of something abnormal. Those scales worry me. I suppose it may be a nasty fungus, or ..." She half-smiled. "Perhaps she's just got a little dragon in her ancestry, hmm?"

"That would be a blessing, wouldn't it?" Krailash said. "You can have one of the family healers in Edgewater examine her when we return. If nothing else, they can cut the scales away." He stood. "I should go."

"Yes," Alaia said, wrapping the child back up in the blanket, and cooing to her gently. "Go, and rain hell on the monsters who made this poor girl an orphan."



Krailash went down the steps from Alaia's wagon and started toward Quelamia's trailer. After half-a-dozen steps he stopped, frowning at the ramshackle, black-painted cart that had suddenly appeared before him. How odd. Where had it come from? A *fourth* wagon in the camp's center, as big as his own, with windows in the shape of oversized humanoid skulls with glass for eyes, a metal chimney pipe jutting crookedly from the roof, and a clacking mobile of animal bones dangling by the door?

The door banged open, and a tiefling leaned out. Purple hair stuck up in ill-tended tufts from the back of her head, sharp horns jutted from her pale red forehead, and her dark eyes twinkled with amusement. A long black pipe dangled from the corner of her mouth, and she exhaled smoke through her nostrils, making her look even more infernal than she might otherwise.

"Hello, Rusty," she said.

Glory. Another of the important figures in camp, but one whose existence had slipped Krailash's mind entirely, as it almost always did unless he were standing face-to-face with her. He hadn't even noticed her wagon until he'd nearly walked into it. Because she hadn't wanted him to. She was not invisible but *forgettable*, slipping from the minds of everyone who met her except Alaia and other leaders of the family. That forgettable quality meant that Krailash's

security plans seldom involved protecting her, but Glory liked it that way. She could, she said, protect herself, and what better protection than going unnoticed? Now that he saw her, all his memories about her returned, and most of them weren't particularly fond.

"There might be trouble coming," he said. "You'd better go back to ... whatever you do in there. For your own safety." The dragonborn and the tiefling races had a long tradition of enmity, though the clash of their respective empires was lost in such dim mists of history that the dislike between Krailash and Glory was more theoretical than practical. The fact that she was a psion—a master of meddling with minds—troubled him far more than her infernal ancestry. Krailash was a warrior, and a person of honor, and Glory's ability to scramble the memories and motivations of her enemies struck him as cowardly.

She took another deep puff on her pipe, the foul smell of burning herbs wafting into Krailash's face. "Nice of you to worry about me. What is it this time? Giant centipedes? Another troop of apes guarding a temple no one even remembers?"

"Someone from the Underdark abducted several nearby villagers, and they may attempt to attack the caravan. Alaia would be annoyed if I allowed you to be kidnapped." Krailash was uncomfortable with Glory's role in the caravan, but he understood her powers were necessary to protect the family's trade secrets from the many would-be rivals who sought to usurp their power and wealth. In some ways, she was the most important member of the caravan, though she mostly just lounged around and smoked and drank. The family paid her well for very little work, but, then, they were paying her for the experience of her long years, not the labor of a few hours.

"Ha. Any cave-dwelling scum who try to kidnap me will end up *working* for me, Krailash. So don't worry on my account."

“There are things in the Dark that don’t have minds to meddle with, demonspawn. And an arrow flying toward you cannot be persuaded to strike someone else instead.”

“Point taken, Rusty. Are you going to jump into the pit with a dagger in your teeth, then?”

“That’s my usual preference. But I’m going to enlist the help of Quelamia.”

A shadow crossed the tiefling’s face. Quelamia’s mind was exceedingly well-protected, and Glory didn’t like people she couldn’t read. She changed the subject quickly. “Who’s the newcomer to camp?”

Krailash frowned. “What do you mean?”

“I sense a new mind.”

“Ah. A human infant left behind when her family was stolen away. Alaia is taking care of her now.”

“Huh. There’s something strange about her mind.” The tiefling shrugged. “Probably just that she’s a baby. Their tiny minds are little maelstroms swirling with unregulated sensory inputs. Good luck with your monster-hunting, Rusty.” She disappeared back into her wagon, slamming the door and making the mobile of bones clatter.

Krailash walked around her wagon to Quelamia’s home, the memory of his encounter with Glory already receding in his mind. He thumped the unbroken trunk of the tree-on-wheels where Quelamia lived with his fist, and a hole—a knothole, really—opened in the bark. The eladrin stuck her head out, pale gold hair hanging long past her shoulders, pointed ears peeking out. Her eyes were unbroken orbs of pale blue, like the glaze on a fine ceramic pot, and though her pupil-less gaze seemed blank, Krailash knew her eyes took in more than his ever could, sometimes in two worlds at once. She said, “Yes?” with her usual absent-minded quality, as if

she were looking past him into the farther reaches of the Feywild, that world beyond this world that she had once called home.

Krailash explained about the crying child, the signs of massacre, the pit he'd found in the temple, and the disappearance of his guardsman. Quelamia's expression became vaguely troubled when he mentioned the Underdark. "If you want us to go down there ..." she began, but Krailash shook his head.

"Our duty is to the caravan. Sad as I am to lose Rainer and to see the human child made an orphan, we must protect the safety of Alaia's holdings, and a trip into the dark against unknown enemies is too dangerous."

"Then what did you have in mind?" Quelamia asked.

"Closing up the passageway from the Underdark to the surface," Krailash said.

Quelamia nodded. "I see. Let me get my staff." She disappeared back into her tree, and returned to the small opening a moment later bearing a brown branch as long as she was tall, with leaves sprouting from shoots along its length—it was a part of her own living tree somehow detached and made into a weapon and implement of power. She flickered, and a moment later was standing beside Krailash, the tree's trunk once again closed and unbroken. "Do the others in camp know what's happened?"

"No, I only told Alaia, and, ah—" He blinked. "Just ... just Alaia, I think."

Quelamia nodded, looking pointedly at the spot between her wagon and Alaia's—in other words, looking at nothing in particular as far as Krailash could see—and said, "Let's see what we can do about this hole in the ground. Lead the way."



Krailash had no fear with Quelamia at his side. The jungle seemed to make way for her as she walked, rendering his usual hack-and-slash trailbreaking unnecessary. Branches swayed aside and thorns

turned their sharp points away when they passed. The wizard was the most powerful member of the caravan, stronger in magic even than Alaia, and was so valuable to the family that she received a percentage of the organization's profits rather than a normal salary, something only fully vested members of the Serrat family usually received. While Krailash's duties were essentially seasonal, with work only required of him during the harvesting season and the long trek of the caravans from the city to the jungle and back again, Quelamia worked actively for the family year-round, advising and assisting the members of the other branches of the family as well as Alaia's own Travelers.

Soon they reached the ruined temple, and Quelamia stepped inside briefly to look at the pit, but quickly returned. She looked quite troubled—which, for her, meant merely a line appearing briefly on her forehead—and directed Krailash to walk some distance away from the structure. "Stay close to me, dragonborn," she said, raising her staff. "I would not have you hurt."

The eladrin lifted her staff, and a wind rose from nowhere, making her long hair blow back and her pale green robe flutter. The trees towering above them groaned, and Krailash looked up in alarm as the canopy of leaves and branches directly overhead began to blacken and turn to smoke, revealing a nearly perfect circle of blue sky as neat as a hole cut in a sheet of paper. Quelamia mouthed syllables that seemed to crash and rumble as they left her mouth, less words than the sound of volcanic rumbles and eruptions, and points of reddish light appeared in the sky. The lights glowed brighter and grew in size, and a high-pitched whistle like a dozen boiling teakettles commenced as they approached. Krailash instinctively crouched and lifted his shield before him when the first flaming chunk of anvil-sized rock smashed into the roof of the temple with a deafening boom. The trees all around them rocked back in the wind of the first impact, but Krailash felt nothing, and as he lowered the shield he could see particles of debris pattering harmlessly off the invisible dome of force that protected Quelamia and himself. Still she chanted, and more meteors streaked down, a

storm of burning rock that smashed the temple into rubble. Krailash allowed himself to gaze in wonder, enjoying the sight of such powerful magic unleashed: better than the fireworks shot off above the gulf in Delzimmer to celebrate the Feast of the Moon Festival.

After a few moments the falling stars stopped coming, the unnatural wind blowing Quelamia's hair ceased, and she lowered her staff, gazing at the devastation before them. Where the temple had stood was only a depression in the earth, filled with rubble. Quelamia approached, head cocked, and then slammed the base of her staff into the ground, where it stuck. Krailash knew from past experience that nothing would move that staff, unless Quelamia willed it; the branch was as solidly rooted as a five-thousand-year-old oak. The wizard held out her hands before her, palms facing each other at shoulder width apart, and then gradually pushed her hands together.

The earth on either side of the temple moved together as if pushed by great unseen hands, huge humps of dirt and rock and broken bits of city piling up and sliding sideways and filling the shallow indentation where the temple had been. Quelamia plucked her staff from the ground and strode around the temple site, dragging her staff's base in the dirt and scoring a line of charred rock that circled the area entirely. Once the circle was closed, she nodded. "There. Nothing will come out of *that* hole again. Of course, there are other openings—the Underdark has a thousand mouths, all hungry—but I doubt there are any so large, or so close to us. I worry less about lone monsters wriggling through cracks in the rock. That hole was large enough to let through a legion of duergar or drow."

"And to take down an entire village."

"Mmm," Quelamia said. "Yes. You said they raided a human settlement?"

Krailash nodded. "Only the girl child was left behind."

"Interesting. There are yuan-ti nearby—I can sense them, or at least the old and ravenous *things* they keep in the pits below their ruined

settlements—but I’m surprised to hear there were humans.”

Krailash shrugged. “You know humans. They settle *everywhere*, even places more sensible races know to avoid.”

The eladrin nodded. “That they do. And yet here we are, following a human into just such a place. What does that say about us?”

“It says that even sensible races have to make a living,” Krailash said, and the eladrin gave him one of her rare and fleeting smiles.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE SHAMAN'S SPIRIT COMPANION, A DIRE BOAR THE particular color of the underside of a threatening storm cloud, nosed its way silently through the undergrowth, nose snuffling, obviously searching for something.

"Up here," Zaltys said, and loosed an arrow.

The shaft of the arrow stuck in the soft jungle ground a foot away from the boar. The feathered fletching of the arrow, taken from a colorful jungle bird, stuck up jauntily.

The spirit boar groaned in a weary, put-upon way, and stepped closer to the base of the tree where Zaltys was perched. The boar jerked its head back, toward the direction of camp, its intent clear: follow me.

"What does mother want now?" Zaltys nocked another arrow. It was surprisingly difficult to shoot straight down with any accuracy, but she'd been practicing, and the next shot speared a wriggling blue-and-red serpent as it slithered past, pinning its head to the earth.

The pig snorted, scratched at the earth—leaving long furrows in the dirt, because the spirit companion was only insubstantial when its mistress Alaia wanted it to be—and gesturing again with its head.

"This is supposed to be my free time," Zaltys grumbled. She unstrung her bow and clambered down from the branches of the vine-encrusted tree, dropping to the ground and bending to retrieve her arrows. She was aware, intellectually, that her family was so wealthy that she could fire arrows into the air for a year without stopping and never put a noticeable dent in the annual ammunition budget, but in practice, she could no more leave a good arrow lying

on the ground than she could go a tenday without sleeping. Besides, she was a member of the Travelers, that branch of the Serrat family that actually went out into the world every year. They weren't wasteful and decadent like the year-round city dwellers who made up the Trading Serrats, or focused solely on results without consideration for expenditures like the spies and enforcers of the Guardian Serrats (whom most of the family secretly called the Cutthroat Serrats, though they only cut the throats of those who threatened the family. Or might threaten it someday. Or who got in the way of the natural flow of commerce). The Travelers spent months in the field, ensuring the continued health and wealth of the family's core business in the most direct way, and they had to be smarter, thriftier, more efficient, and more responsible than the rest of the family.

Or so her mother had taught her, and after sixteen years as the heir apparent of the Traveling branch of the family, Zaltys had learned her lessons well. "Lead on, pigmother," she said, and Alaia's spirit companion set off toward the camp. Zaltys looked around the jungle as she walked, but she didn't see any bodyguards lurking in the bushes. That either meant she'd finally convinced Krailash she didn't need protecting, or he'd assigned bodyguards who were better than usual at being stealthy. Probably the latter.

They were almost two tendays from the city, just on the outskirts of the jungle, and camped a good distance from the haunted city of Ammathtar, so the only threats were occasional jungle beasts. The defenses around the camp weren't as elaborate as they would eventually become, for there was just one outer ring of supply and transport carts, surrounding an inner ring where the more high-ranking principals of the camp lived. The laborers were left to pitch their own tents, entirely too close to the animal pens for olfactory comfort, Zaltys thought. She went past the elaborate treehouse on wheels—grown, rather than carved—that was the wizard Quelamia's home, pausing to knock the living trunk with her knuckles for luck. She squinted at the squat black carriage where the psion Glory lurked when she wasn't needed, which was most of

the time. The majority of other inhabitants of the caravan couldn't see Glory's wagon—or Glory herself—at all, or, more accurately, forgot what they'd seen immediately afterward, but Zaltys was one of the few Glory was forbidden to mentally handicap, since she needed to understand all the workings of the caravan in order to take over its operations someday. Zaltys slapped the windchimes hanging by Glory's door, setting up a clattering—the chimes were bone, not metal, carved in patterns that became more disturbing the longer you looked. Glory's door opened, and the tiefling peered out suspiciously, then sighed when she saw Zaltys. “I thought you were playing in the woods all afternoon,” she said.

Zaltys gestured to the ghost boar, which looked back at her with the sort of infinite, weary patience that serves for impatience among the spiritually enlightened. “Mother summoned me. Any idea what it's about?”

“Sure.” Glory lifted a long, black pipe to her lips and took a puff, smoke rising in curls from her nostrils.

“Well?” Zaltys prompted.

“Horseman arrived a little while ago,” she said, taking another puff, clearly enjoying drawing things out. Glory liked to play mind games. “With another horseman behind him. Or should I say, horseboy. Krailash yelled at them for a while—he yelled at the older one, anyway, the kid just stood there looking annoyed and embarrassed—and then took them to meet with your mother. The horseman left a few minutes ago. But the boy ... He's still in your mother's caravan.”

The boar snorted and started walking.

“What's it all about?” Zaltys said.

“Nobody tells me anything,” Glory said. “What am I, a mind reader?”

“Yes,” Zaltys said.

“Bah,” Glory said. “You assume I care enough to read anybody’s mind.” She slammed the heavy black door after her, disappearing from sight.

Like all conversations with the tiefling, it had been more frustrating than illuminating—but that didn’t mean it wasn’t a *little* illuminating. Zaltys followed the ghost pig, reaching back to scratch the diamond-shaped spot of scarred skin at the small of her back. It itched sometimes, but only when she got close to the jungle. Something to do with the humidity, her mother said. She’d made up an ointment, but it never did much good.

Two things that always wait for me in the jungle, she thought. The itching, and the dreams. On the whole, she’d rather have the itches. At least the ointment helped a little. Nothing helped the dreams: not the expensive sleeping potions her mother brought for her, not Glory’s attempts to make her forget the dreams instantly upon waking, not Krailash’s suggestion that she train so hard that she collapsed into a dreamless sleep at night. Her dreams were never troubled in the city, but as soon as she reached the jungle, they began. It was enough to make a girl want to sniff some terazul powder, even if using the drug was forbidden to the family, and stop sleeping entirely.

They’d reached her mother’s wagon, a cozy little house on wheels. Zaltys slept there too, on the rare occasions when she didn’t simply sleep out under the stars or in a tree branch (always with guards posted below, as if she needed them, but Krailash wouldn’t let her do it at all otherwise). Still, despite her tiny bed tucked into a corner of the wagon, it was entirely her mother’s domain, all carved figurines and crystals and that odd combination of finery and efficiency that characterized the Traveling Serrats.

Zaltys went in without knocking, and stood, gaping, in the doorway. “What are you doing here?”

“That’s no way to speak to your cousin,” Alaia said, her blue eyes stern. Her spirit companion curled up at her feet, untroubled by the

fact that it had to pass through her legs to do so, then vanished like mist rising from a lake in the morning. Alaia sat on a little divan, holding a delicate teacup. The boy beside her held a teacup too, though he didn't look too happy about it. He looked, in a word, surly, his gaze downcast, his lips pursed, his dark hair hanging across his forehead and nearly covering his eyes.

"My apologies," Zaltys said. "What are you doing here, Cousin?"

Julen shrugged. "Don't know," he said. "They made me." Then, with a trifle more heat: "Dragged me out of bed. Made me ride horses for a tenday! My rear—" He glanced at his aunt and cleared his throat. "I'm not used to riding so many days in a row. Or eating all my meals out of saddlebags."

"Your cousin," Alaia said, "is on loan to us, from his father in the Guardians."

Zaltys made a great show of looking around the room. "I don't see any spies from rival families. I don't see anyone trying to burn down our caravan, or steal our horses, or do anything that we'd need protection from."

"His father thought it would be best if he learned some practical field work. To find out, as it were, what exactly he's protecting."

Zaltys frowned. "Then why didn't he come with us when we left? Why send him chasing after our dust cloud for days?" She paused. "Not that I'm unhappy to see you, Julen. I always had fun playing chase and ambush and hide-and-find with you when we were small. And of course it's nice to have more family around." That was an axiom of life in the family, which was also the family *business*, though her mother sometimes amended it to, "It's always nice to have family around ... preferably around the next corner, or even farther away, if you can manage it."

"I was supposed to join you, but I overslept." Julen didn't look at her. For a member of the Guardians, who were arguably even more deceitful by nature than the Traders, he wasn't much good at lying.

Presumably telling lies was something you got better at as you practiced, like throwing knives or shooting arrows.

“He ran away,” Alaia said. “Didn’t want to spend the next three months out in the bushes with the savages and the wild animals, if I understand his father’s letter correctly.” Julen attempted to sink into the divan, without much luck, and Alaia smirked. “Of course, my brother had some choice words for me too, since I didn’t send anyone to fetch him before we left. But my caravan is not a palanquin, waiting to carry this young man anywhere he likes at his leisure. My caravan is like the sun. The sun rises when it rises, and my caravan goes when it goes.”

Zaltys pulled over a chair and dropped into it, noting her mother’s moue of distaste at the dirt and leaves on the cushions, bad form—but not reacting to it. “Why would you want to stay in the boring old city anyway? It’s much more fun out here in the world.”

“Clean water,” he said, beginning to count on his fingers. “Which doesn’t have to be boiled before you drink it. Soft beds. Food that doesn’t come packed in a barrel or bleeding on the end of a hunting spear. Games, and parties, and shops, and walking by the harbor, and a *library*, and ...” He shook his head. “What’s so good about the rest of the world? Nature? We build cities and great big walls to keep nature *out*.”

“Without nature you wouldn’t have any of the wealth that buys you all those other things you mentioned.” Alaia was amused. “Zaltys, be a dear and show your cousin some of the diversions to be had around camp. But *don’t* take him into the jungle without an escort, all right? My brother would not be forgiving if I let his son be killed by a deathrattle viper or a carnivorous vine.”

Julen stood, scowling. “I don’t need guards. I’ve been trained in knifework and unarmed combat by the head of security for the Guardians! I’m a pupil of the greatest street fighters in the city of Delzimmer, and—”

“There are things in the jungle that would take your knife away, use it to clean their teeth, and then stick it through your head hilt first,” Zaltys said. “Dagger-fighting is fine for drunkards in bars—though you’re only, what, twelve, so I guess you’re too young for that—but it’s not much good in the jungle.”

“I’m *fifteen*, as you well know. And my daggers can—”

“Yes, fine,” Alaia said, rubbing her temples as if she had a headache coming on. “Take the discussion outside. Perhaps you can teach Zaltys some of your knife tricks, Julen, and she can teach you some of the ranger skills she’s picked up over the years.”

Zaltys left, Julen at her heels, and once they were on the ground outside, the door slamming shut after them, she sniffed. “I can’t make a ranger out of you in a summer, but maybe I can teach you which end of the arrow you point at your prey, and which leaves you shouldn’t wipe your bottom with, unless you want a case of the bloody itch.” Just saying the word “itch” made her reach around and scratch at the scar on her back.

“Why would I want to learn to be a woodcutter like you anyway?” He made a face. “What’s that smell?”

Zaltys opened her mouth just a bit, not enough for anyone to notice—she could smell better when she could taste the air with her tongue, for some reason, a quality she shared with no one else, as far as she knew—and then gagged and spat. “The latrine pits,” she said, wiping her mouth on the back of her hand. “Or possibly the animal pens. We’re upwind, mostly, but sometimes the winds shift.”

“Wonderful,” he muttered.

“Come on. You must be hungry after your trip. Let’s get some of that caravan food you were so eager to try.”

Julen groaned theatrically, clutching his belly. Zaltys couldn’t tell if he was genuinely complaining or just trying to be funny. They’d been friends when they were children, often playing together in the gardens, but that was before his studies with the Guardians and her

journeys with the Travelers had necessarily pulled them apart. In recent years they'd only run into one another at family gatherings, and since the Travelers were out of the city for half the year, Zaltys missed most of those. The Guardians were a secretive bunch anyway. Zaltys had a few cousins she'd count as friends as well as relations in the Traders (not *all* of them were obsessed with ostentatious displays of wealth; some of them were obsessed with numbers instead, which Zaltys could respect if not understand), but as a rule the Guardians kept themselves apart. They were the second-smallest branch of the family, consisting of just Zaltys's uncle Ramul and his wife and many children, plus hirelings. But they wielded disproportionate power. If anyone committed the cardinal, unforgiveable sin—betraying the family—the Guardians were the ones to mete out punishment. And, in more practical terms, they kept rival trade groups from interfering with business in either legal or more underhanded ways. The Guardians had a certain mystique, and Julen's brothers and sisters were spies, assassins, and masters of sowing rumor and deceit, but Julen himself was the youngest, and maybe he thought his family's prowess and power accrued to him by right of birth.

But the family didn't work that way. Birth got you certain things—you'd never wonder where your next meal was coming from—but if you wanted to advance, and take on more power and responsibility, you had to *earn* it. Zaltys wondered if this season with the caravan was a chance for Julen to prove himself, or punishment for his failing to do so.

She gently steered him around Glory's wagon, since he couldn't see it, and Glory wasn't above letting people walk into her might-as-well-be-invisible home just for the amusement of seeing them hit their heads.

"Why do you keep scratching? Did *you* wipe with some of the wrong leaves?"

Zaltys, who hadn't even realized her hand had strayed to the old sore spot, crossed her arms. "No. It's ... my scar itches."

“Oh, I heard about that,” Julen said. “You got it before you were adopted, right?”

“Yes. When my village was killed, I was wounded. It’s never healed properly. Mother says whoever attacked us must have used some sort of cursed weapon. I’m lucky I survived.”

Julen frowned. “Yes, I remember. Ah. Sorry.”

Zaltys shrugged. “Thanks, but it’s not a loss I feel. I don’t even know my original parents’ names. They were massacred, along with the others. The caravan buried them after they rescued me. I’ve seen the heap of rubble they’ve got for a grave.”

“There you are!” Krailash boomed, approaching them with the implacability and approximate mass of an avalanche. “Where are you two going?”

“Just to get some food,” Zaltys said.

“If you’re hungry, you can stay,” the dragonborn said. “But our scouts stumbled across a shadow snake not far from here. It killed one of our men, and the others are doing their best to track it, but we could use your help.” He glanced at Julen. “Your cousin is one of our best trackers.”

Zaltys grinned. “Come on, Julen. You’re supposed to be learning stealth, right, as part of your spycraft? You’ll never see a better teacher than a shadow snake.”

“At home, I’d be eating grapes and some of the good sheep cheese,” he said glumly, “and possibly reading a volume of poetry. Or at least skulking through a nice dry hallway somewhere. Here, I get to traipse through the damp woods after a snake.”

“Yes,” Zaltys said. “You’re absolutely right. This is *much* more fun.”



Zaltys knew she was something like a princess. The city of Delzimmer had no noble class, no king, no aristocrats. Instead, the upper echelons of society were populated by the successful

merchants and traders, and no matter how mean your birth, you could ascend to the ranks of the most powerful by sheer sweat, treachery, and ingenuity.

That was the theory, anyway. In practice, control of the city was held by several powerful merchant families. While the Serrats had not yet reached the pinnacle of power held by the ruling four families, their influence was growing every year. They'd risen to prominence following the great disaster that turned Delzimmer into a port city, taking advantage of the chaos following that upheaval to profit immensely. The Serrats had further enriched and entrenched themselves in the city's society by becoming sole providers of terazul and the potent substances that could be made from the rare flower.

Zaltys was the only heir of Alaia, one of the three most powerful members of the family. During the six months of the year when she lived in the city, there were servants and tutors and bodyguards and social functions and ceremonial duties and meetings about profit projections and strategic realignment and diversification that she had to attend no matter how boring and abstract she found the topics. She wore dresses, and charmed old men from the Traders, and studied languages—not for ease of communication, because there were spells that would let her converse with people of other tongues, but because language revealed things about the culture that spoke it, and understanding other cultures was imperative to the success of the family's far-flung business. Zaltys didn't mind those months in Delzimmer, living like a princess, escorted everywhere by personal guards, eating fine foods and sipping watered wine and lounging in the Serrat's private gardens.

But those months never felt entirely *real* to Zaltys. They felt like pretend: like the games she played with her nannies as a little girl, pretending to have formal dinners with her dolls, or making believe she was at a costume party, dressing in cast-offs from her mother's wardrobe. The only time she felt entirely real was during the twice-yearly expeditions into the jungle, when the caravan took the

workers to the few spots where the rare and precious terazul blossoms grew. For three months at a time, Zaltys stopped being a princess and became a ranger, armed with bow and knives instead of dessert spoons and pearl earrings, learning to live and love the wild, hunting for food and for pleasure and to protect the caravan from predators. She wanted to stay in the jungle always—despite the itch, and despite the dreams—because it was the only place she felt fully awake. She *belonged* there. She knew her mother felt the same way, though Alaia, being a shaman, had a somewhat different relationship with the natural world; no less reverent, but certainly less martial in focus. As a young girl, on her first trips with the caravan at age six or seven, Zaltys had pleaded with her mother to let them stay in the wild always. But, for various logistical and political reasons, it couldn't be. Zaltys had come to understand these reasons as the years went by, although she never stopped resenting them.

In the jungle, she didn't feel even remotely like a princess. She felt like a wild queen.

CHAPTER FIVE

JULEN WAS NO MORE COMFORTABLE IN THE DEEP WOODS than a cloth merchant, and he swore softly every time a thorned vine brushed him, and complained about the heat and humidity, which grasped them like a damp and sweaty fist. But Zaltys noted that he set his feet with care, and moved more silently than any city boy should be expected to—certainly more silently than Krailash, who was crashing through the brush some yards away with his own guards in hope of flushing out the shadow snake.

Such beasts were treacherous, and seemed not entirely natural. They could be enormous, twice the length of a man, serpents in shape but shadowy in substance, and they had the trick of traveling from one spot to another without crossing the intervening space. She'd never seen one up close, only glimpsing them twice in her past travels, and usually deeper in the jungle. Stories said they were remnants of some forgotten yuan-ti settlement, pets left behind when their masters died or moved on. Their venom was supposed to be unspeakably virulent—legend said that a limb bitten by a shadow snake would turn shadowy and insubstantial itself, not so much rotting away as gradually fading from reality—but Zaltys wasn't overly worried about the possibility of a bite. She'd never been bitten by a snake, despite literally countless encounters with them, and anyway, the caravan had an ample supply of anti-venoms.

She put her hand on Julen's shoulder, making him pause. They crouched among the thick-limbed trees near a clearing, where the vine-encrusted head of an enormous statue crowded the trees aside. "There," Zaltys whispered, pointing.

Julen squinted. "I don't see anything."

“It’s dim, but it’s there, just a coil of shadow in the shade of the statue.” The shadow snake was either hiding or waiting in ambush, as its kind preferred to attack from concealment. Zaltys could appreciate that. It was a tactic she favored herself.

“I’ll take your word for it,” Julen said.

Zaltys reached back to her quiver, feeling the fletching of the arrows, looking for one in particular. Her mother and Quelamia had provided her with a few arrows that had special qualities. One was tipped with the tooth of a salamander; another had an arrowhead made from a crystalline shard of the Living Gate, whatever that was; a third was coated in the slime from a basilisk’s eyes. Her fingers found the one she was looking for: feathers stiff with cold, so chilled they almost burned her finger. She drew the arrow, its head a vicious triangle of pure ice, and nocked it in her bow.

“You’re shooting at shadows,” Julen said, still squinting. Krailash and the other guards were crashing through, coming closer, and the shadow snake coiled itself, preparing to strike. With its ability to shift from place to place, it could bite everyone in the party before they had a moment to fight back. Unless Zaltys could stop it.

She drew the arrow, looking beyond the length of the shaft at the grayish-black serpent, and loosed.

The arrow left a trail of vapor in the air as it flew, and it struck the snake just below its jaw. The arrowhead shattered on impact, chips of magical ice striking the shadow serpent in the head and throat, and a web of cold and frost grew, pinning the snake to the statue. The serpent twisted wildly and flickered, becoming insubstantial in patches, but Quelamia’s magics wouldn’t permit it to phase out of solidity and escape, not without tearing its own throat out in the process.

“Now I see it,” Julen said, stepping into the clearing after Zaltys. “Nice shooting, Cousin.”

“Wait for it to die before you get too close,” she said, watching the snake writhe, body flapping like a banner in a high wind. “They’re

lethal in their death throes.”

Why do you kill me, child of Zehir? the shadow snake said, fixing her with its eerie twilit eyes.

Zaltys stared. “What—did you ...?”

Julen looked at her oddly. “Did I what?”

“I thought I heard ...” But she hadn’t heard it, exactly. The snake’s voice had spoken in her head, the way Glory could when she pushed her thoughts into Zaltys’s mind—generally because the psion was too lazy to walk across the camp to speak to Zaltys in person.

You killed one of my friends, Zaltys thought, though it wasn’t quite true—she didn’t even know the name of the guard who’d died, and Krailash would have mentioned if it was someone she knew. But the dead guard was someone who worked for the family, which meant she had a responsibility to him.

But we are death from the darkness, the shadow snake said. Its writhing slowed, and though there was no light to fade from its eyes, the darkness in its eyes became less malevolent and more merely empty. *We are poison and surprise. We are children of ...*

The snake died, and seemed less eerie and dangerous in death, becoming merely a giant snake with grayish-black scales. Julen was poking at the serpent with the blade of his knife, opening its jaws to look at the fangs within, and Zaltys had to bite back the urge to tell him to stop, that it wasn’t respectful to prod the dead, but of course, it was just a beast, though possibly a magical one. Had Zaltys imagined the voice in her head? The things the serpent said, they weren’t so dissimilar from the things she sometimes heard in her dreams.

Krailash appeared with his guards then. “Ah, you beat us to the kill,” he said. “I suspected you would.” He nodded to Julen. “Are you skilled with a knife, young man?”

Julen flipped the blade up into the air and caught it by the hilt in his other hand without looking. “What do you think?”

“I think juggling isn’t the same as cutting,” the dragonborn said dryly. “But if you’ve any skill as an anatomist, feel free to cut out the eyes and fangs of the beast there, and skin it too. The wizard in our caravan can use the components of a shadow beast in her rituals, I’m sure. Leave the meat, though. I wouldn’t want shadowflesh in a cookpot. No telling what sort of indigestion that might give you.”

Zaltys again resisted the urge to object. Why should cutting up a shadow serpent strike her as a desecration?

Julen sighed. “Butchery isn’t as fun as other things, but my father made me dissect all sorts of things so I’d know the best place to strike with a blade, so I’m sure I can manage this.”

“Good. Zaltys, you’ll keep him company?” And keep watch over him, was the unspoken portion, or so Zaltys assumed.

“Yes, Krai.”

“Excellent. See you both back at camp. Don’t linger—the parts will spoil if we don’t get them to Quelamia soon.”

Zaltys sat on the statue’s jutting snout and watched as Julen deftly cut into the serpent’s head, levering out its eyes. He dropped the orbs into a leather pouch and set that aside. The ice from her arrow was already melting, and the shaft fell to the ground, where Julen kicked it aside. “Don’t do that,” she said, letting some of her confusion emerge in the form of annoyance. “We don’t have an infinite supply of arrows out here.”

“Right, sorry.” Julen was intent on his work, pulling the serpent’s body free of the ice and stretching it out to its full length on the ground. “Didn’t think about it. It’s so strange, this creature doesn’t even *bleed*. Means I won’t need to change my shirt, at least, which is good, since I only brought three others, and you’ve reminded me that I can’t just send my valet out to get more ... barbaric.” He sawed off the snake’s head—Zaltys had to look away—then crouched and sliced neatly along the center of the snake’s belly from the base of the headless stump to the cloaca. He put the knife

aside, grasped the snake's skin in both hands, and pulled with gentle, even pressure, peeling its skin back in a single piece. Once the skin was pulled almost entirely free of the flesh underneath, he used the knife to cut through the last clinging shreds of fat and muscle, and held up the shadow snake's skin. It was a large, single sheet of snakeskin, and it fluttered oddly, seeming to absorb light and fuzzily emit darkness. "Hate to roll this up, but I don't see how we can carry it loose. Give me a hand?"

Zaltys nodded, trying not to let her reluctance show, and helped Julen roll up the snakeskin into a bundle small enough to carry. Once he had it in his arms, and the pouch of eyes and teeth at his belt, he said, "Okay. Keep me from getting eaten by tigers, because I don't have a free hand."

She led him back to camp, though she could hear the guards Krailash had left behind moving on either side in tandem with them. Zaltys and Julen had never been out of sight of their protectors, probably, but Krailash had shown an unusual level of discretion, for him, by leaving them hidden. Perhaps he didn't want to embarrass Zaltys in front of her cousin. Zaltys knew she didn't need baby-sitters, and Krailash had assured her often that he had full faith in her ability to take care of herself in the jungle—indeed, she'd taught some his men the ways of the wild over the years—but she was a principal heir of the Serrat family; Krailash wasn't about to take chances with her safety. It chafed, but the one time she'd used her superior skills to give his guards the slip and go roaming the jungle on her own, Krailash had been so beside himself with worry that she'd felt more guilty than pleased with herself, and since then she'd limited herself to merely complaining.

Back in camp, dusk was falling, and it was nearly time for the first evening meal shift. Zaltys led Julen to Quelamia's wagon and knocked on the trunk.

A tiny knothole opened into a round door, and the eladrin looked out. "Yes?"

“We brought you dead animal parts,” Julen said.

“How ... thoughtful.”

“Skin of a shadow snake,” Zaltys said. “And some other bits. Krailash said you could use them?”

“Oh, yes,” she said, plucking the skin and the pouch from Julen’s hands. “I’m engaged in a little project, at your mother’s behest, Zaltys. I think you’ll enjoy the results.” Without another word, she sealed up the trunk of her tree.

Zaltys and Julen exchanged shrugs. “You never got that food,” she said. “Want to come eat with me? I usually have my meal with the guardsmen.”

“You eat with the servants?” Julen frowned. “Why?”

“Would you rather talk about timetables and schedules and harvesting quotas with my mother, or about dice and fighting and war stories with the guards?”

“The latter, certainly, but—they include you in their conversation? The times I’ve been alone with servants, they barely say *anything*, except for my guard of the bedchamber, and that’s different.”

“We’re a bit more informal in the Travelers,” she said. “Everyone here depends on everyone else to keep them alive. It’s a dangerous business, going out in the field. If you don’t act like a little lordling, they won’t treat you like one.”

“I’ll do my best,” Julen said, and they started toward the mess tent.

Krailash met them, and held up his hand. “No,” he said. “Your mother wants you to dine with her, Quelamia, and ...” he frowned. “There was someone else.”

“Glory,” Zaltys prompted, and Krailash’s expression cleared.

“Yes. *Her*. A table will be set up by your mother’s wagon.”

“Am I being punished for something?” Zaltys said.

“I think she just wants the family and the most loyal retainers to dine together,” Krailash said. “She wanted me there too, but I said it was better for morale if I ate with my men.” He winked at her—a gesture he’d picked up during his time among humans, though he used it rarely, being a serious person by nature—and said, “You’ll be dining in an hour or so.”

She sighed. “All right. Can I leave Julen with you for a little while?”

“Why?” Krailash said.

“I left my ice arrow in the jungle. Stupid, I know, but my cousin here distracted me. I’d like to go retrieve it.”

“I’ll detail a few guards—”

Zaltys rolled her eyes. “It’s barely ten minutes away, and that’s if I creep along slowly. The scouts didn’t find anything threatening besides the shadow snake, and it’s dead. We’re barely in the jungle yet—I think I can make it that far safely. All right?”

Krailash considered. “All right. This time. But come straight back.”

“Yes, yes.” Zaltys told Julen she’d see him at dinner, then set off toward the jungle. She took a brief side trip to snatch one of the folding shovels the laborers used to dig latrine pits, then went into the trees.

She found the clearing easily, following the marks left by her own trail—Julen hadn’t left any more sign than she had, amazingly, he was skilled at stealth—until she reached the statue’s severed head. The serpent’s body was still there, untouched as yet by predators. Zaltys began digging a hole near the statue, easily turning up spades full of the yielding, damp earth, until she had a small pit a few feet deep. She placed the shadow snake’s body in the hole, and put its eyeless head on top. Then she refilled the hole and piled some of the smaller chunks of statue rubble over the grave, disturbing countless colonies of fat, trundling beetles in the process. She kneeled for a moment by the grave, unsure why she’d felt compelled to bury it, unsure what she should say. “I’m sorry you

had to die,” she said finally, and stood up, turning back toward her camp.

While she’d been intent on filling the grave, the clearing had filled with snakes. Mundane ones, not flame spitters or shadow snakes or coil constrictors, just brightly-colored jungle serpents, all lifting their heads in the air and looking at her, swaying slightly. Zaltys started to take a step back, but she sensed, somehow, that they meant her no harm. Were they capable of telling that she’d done a kindness for their larger, more shadowy relative? Or annoyed at the way she’d casually killed one of their own with an arrow earlier? Either seemed possible, though neither was likely. As she moved forward, they slithered aside, clearing a path for her, and Zaltys backed into the trees, watching the serpents as they, in turn, watched her.

Once she’d put a few trees between herself and the clearing, she turned and raced back to camp.

CHAPTER SIX

A LONG TABLE HAD BEEN BROUGHT IN FROM SOMEWHERE—
or possibly constructed rapidly by the carpenters and wheelwrights who traveled with the caravan—and covered with a rich pale blue cloth. Actual glass and porcelain dishes had been set out, in place of the usual wood and stoneware, and there was even a cut-glass vase filled with fresh jungle flowers in the table's center. Only the seating betrayed the essential roughness of the enterprise, being a motley assortment of folding stools and camp chairs. When Zaltys arrived, having changed out of her hunting leathers into something less formal than her city garb but, at least, not actually blood- and sap-stained, Alaia sat at the head of the table dressed in mist-colored robes with a jeweled diadem on her brow, with Julen at her left. He wore a black formal dining suit that Zaltys couldn't believe he'd bothered to pack. Quelamia sat farther down the table, and wore robes that seemed woven from waterfalls and sunlight and green leaves. Glory sat slouched across from her.

"Glory," Zaltys said, taking the empty chair at her mother's right hand. "I didn't know you even *owned* a dress!"

Glory sniffed. Her gown was equal parts shadow and spiderweb, clinging to her slim and shapely form, and her jewelry was the silver of moonlight. "I found it at the bottom of a trunk somewhere."

"Who's talking?" Julen looked around, frowning.

"Glory," Alaia said sternly. "Uncloud the boy's mind. He's seventh in line to succeed the head of the Guardians—I daresay he has the standing to know you *exist*, at least for the duration of our meal."

“Sorry. It’s habit.” Glory waved her hand in a gesture that, Zaltys knew, was entirely unnecessary, and Julen gasped.

“A tiefling! Where’d you come from?”

“Glory is our resident psion,” Alaia said, patting Julen’s knee.

“Most people stare at my horns,” Glory said, and Julen looked away, blushing. Glory preferred to go unnoticed, but Julen had quite obviously noticed the way her clinging gown showed off her bosom. Zaltys snickered, and her mother gave her a warning look.

“It’s so nice to have more family with us,” Alaia said. “I do not imagine we’ll be able to have a formal dinner every night, but I thought it would be a nice welcome for Julen, to help ease him into the reality of life in the caravan.”

“It’s walking, walking, and more walking,” Glory said. “Or, if you’re me, riding in a carriage. And then sitting, and waiting, and sitting some more, and *then* doing a little work at the end.”

“Some of us have work to do throughout,” Quelamia said. “But, yes, there are long stretches of simply traveling.”

“So ... we’re not there yet?” Julen said. “I mean, this is the jungle, right?”

“This is the edge of the jungle,” Zaltys said. “We have to go a lot deeper to get to the terazul blossoms—under trees so dense the sun doesn’t really penetrate, among the wild things and ruins, along tracks that become so overgrown in the months between our visits that Quelamia and the road crews have to clear the paths all over again.”

“The overgrowth is something we encourage, magically,” Alaia said. “Though the jungle scarcely needs any help. But it helps hide the paths from those who would steal our trade secrets.” She gestured to a waiting servant—just a laborer pressed into service for the evening—who brought over a tureen of soup and ladled it out into the waiting green glass bowls before each person at the table.

“I don’t see why you need to traipse off into the jungles anyway,” Julen said, sniffing his soup dubiously before tasting a mouthful. “Huh. This isn’t bad.”

Zaltys took a spoonful of her own, and found it rather bland, but then, her favorite part of any caravan meal was the fresh-killed game, and that would come later. “How would we avoid coming into the jungle?” she said. “That’s where the flowers grow, and without the flowers, where would the family be? What are the Serrats without terazul?”

Julen shrugged. “Well, there are the betting parlors, and the ships—which transport more than just terazul products—and all the property we own and the rents we collect, and all the other enterprises the Traders set up.”

“All noble pursuits, and it’s certainly wise to diversify,” Alaia said, “but the backbone of our family is the terazul trade. Our profits in other endeavors rise and fall, but terazul income is dependable. Without it, we’d be ... well, just merchants, instead of merchant princes. And if the founder of our family hadn’t stumbled across the flowers in his travels, and kept their location a secret for his use alone, he’d have remained a humble importer.”

“You can say ‘smuggler,’ ” Julen said. “It’s what he was.”

Alaia sighed. “Fine. But the fact remains, our more respectable businesses were built on the back of his discovery, and terazul remains central to the family’s prosperity.”

“All right, granted,” Julen said. “So dig up a few of the flowers, roots and all, and bring them back to the city. Let’s grow the crops there. I know the climate’s different, not so terribly damp, but surely Quelamia or someone else can do something about that with magic. What else is magic for, if not making life more convenient?” He slapped at an insect that buzzed around his neck. The tall torches burning around them kept most of the bugs away, but not all. “It just seems silly, spending all this effort, employing all these

hirelings, to go out to the jungle twice a year to fetch a bunch of *flowers*.”

“The boy’s a genius,” Glory said. “Transporting the plants. Now why didn’t anybody ever think of *that* before?” She snapped her fingers at a hovering servant, who jumped, having clearly forgotten Glory was there since filling her soup bowl. “More wine here,” she said, then turned back to Julen. “It’s been tried. Doesn’t work.”

“The family’s founder himself tried,” Quelamia said. She hadn’t touched her soup, or her wine, and she gazed into her water glass as if seeing faraway places in its depths—and maybe she was—eladrin were strange, and never seemed entirely in this world. “The flowers will grow when transported. They will thrive, even. There were even some growing in the gardens of the family villas, until the Guardians became concerned that visitors might notice them, discover they were terazul, and leave with the knowledge of what the flowers look like, making it possible for scouts to scour the jungle and find them. Those blossoms are all gone now, of course.” She lapsed into silence.

“So what’s the problem?” Julen said. “If we had a captive crop back home, we could protect it year-round, and destroy all the wild flowers. Then my father wouldn’t have to worry so much about keeping people from finding out where they grow.”

“The flowers will grow in other places,” Alaia said, “but they lose their special properties. They become, simply, pretty blossoms.”

“She means they can’t be made into potions that give you superficially revelatory but actually nonsensical visions,” Glory said. “Or dried and ground up into powder that lets you stay awake for three days straight without losing your ability to concentrate intensely—though you might lose a few teeth and get nosebleeds if you sniff too much of it.” She glugged the last of her wine and gestured for more.

“Oh,” Julen said. “Huh. Anybody know why the flowers only work when they grow wild? I thought plants were plants.”

“As far as we can tell, it’s magical,” Quelamia said. “Something about the soil in the deep jungle is imbued with magic, perhaps as a result of the great cataclysm that tore the land asunder and created the Gulf of Luiren. The roots of the terazul vines tap into some reservoir of magic, and give the flowers their useful, if morally questionable, qualities.”

“Morally questionable?” Alaia said, rather sharply. And Zaltys thought, Here we go. “No one forces anyone to use terazul potions or powders, Quelamia. Our vendors advise customers of the potency of the potions, and let them know the products are best used in moderation.”

“Terazul flowers are *addictive*,” Quelamia said. “It is difficult for addicts to practice moderation.”

“Terazul is no more addictive than sweet wine or the vile crumbleweed that Glory smokes in her pipe every day. Some people are weak, and will become dependent on *anything*,” Alaia said. “The family can’t be responsible for every choice our customers make.”

“Too true,” Quelamia said. “We are, all of us, only responsible for our own actions and our own lives.” She rose. “If you’ll excuse me, Alaia, and Zaltys, and Julen, and Glory. I have much work ahead of me.”

“Oh, don’t go,” Alaia said, calming down. “I didn’t mean to get us started on that old argument. You’re always welcome at my table.”

“I know,” Quelamia said. “And you should know I take no offense. Eternity is long, and all these concerns are trivial when considered in light of deep time. But, speaking of smaller timescales, if you’d like me to finish that ... special project ... by the date you requested, I had best return to my work.”

“Ah, of course. Well, please yourself.”

Quelamia drifted away, and when she was gone, Glory belched. “It’s easy to be self-righteous when you’ve been around for 200 years.

Thinks she knows better than everybody. I've got no problem with the moral—what would you call it—component of our business.”

Alaia sighed. “I’m so pleased to hear our enterprise causes no moral qualms for the member of our party who routinely erases the memories of other sentient creatures. That’s most comforting. Of course I know the arguments against terazul. They’re not wholly without merit. But the terazul trade gives us wealth, and in turn, we employ countless citizens of Delzimmer and the cities of our trading partners. We pay fair wages, do good civic works, and offer countless advantages to our community. One might argue that the roots of our business are a trifle poisonous, but the fruits, at least, are sweet.”

“I don’t think right and wrong really enter into it,” Zaltys said slowly. “What matters is family. You support your family, and they support you. That’s the foundation of all our success. You live for your family, and serve for your family, and die for your family.”

“Without that, we’re nothing,” Julen said, raising his glass of watered wine to Zaltys. “The wizard doesn’t understand. She’s not family. A family retainer, yes, and I’m sure a valuable adviser, but ...”

“Yes,” Alaia said. “It’s different, when you’re part of the family.” She reached out and took the hands of her daughter and her nephew.

“If you’re all going to start hugging each other,” Glory said, “I’d like to be excused.”



Julen chose to sleep out with Zaltys in the middle of camp, under the stars, where, as he said, “I can at least dream about the hope of a breeze.” After they laid out their bedrolls and stretched out, it wasn’t long before Julen said, “How can you *sleep* with all that racket?”

Zaltys frowned. The hammering of the carpenters had stopped, the shouting and *clang* of the guards practicing their weapons was over,

and the camp was as quiet as it ever got. “What do you mean?”

“The birds, the growls, the hoots, the bugs—this jungle is louder than the streets of Delzimmer during the Midsummer Festival!”

Now that he mentioned it, Zaltys could discern those sounds he mentioned—the howls of monkeys, the buzzing music of bugs, the deep croak of a million frogs singing, the occasional growl of a predator and squeal of dying prey, all mingling into the wall of noise that was The Jungle. “I like it,” she said. “I find it peaceful. Restful. The truth is, I have trouble sleeping back home in the city without it.”

Julen groaned. “It’s true what they say. The Travelers are mad. I won’t be able to sleep a moment because of all this din.”

Ten minutes later, listening to her cousin snore on the other side of their campfire, Zaltys stared up at the pinpoint stars and hoped no dreams would come. They weren’t *in* the jungle yet, after all, not really, and sometimes the dreams didn’t come until she was deeper into the wild. But when she finally succumbed to sleep, she did dream, though it was more real than the dreams she had in the city, more akin to the visions *terazul* users were said to experience: visions beyond reality, revealing a deeper strata of the true universe.

Zaltys walked through the stone plaza of a ruined city, the old structures lit by flickering torches. Fragments of torn clothing and smears of blood were the only signs of some recent violence, and her ranger’s eye revealed to her what had happened: a group, taken by surprise by overwhelming force, and dragged away.

She’d had this dream before, and knew how it would go, but she was powerless to stop its progress. She left the plaza, walking along a rutted path through the trees, until she finally reached a curious circular bit of stonework set in the ground. There were fist-sized holes in the stone at regular intervals, and a closed trapdoor in the center, and Zaltys knew it was the lid of a pit, or dungeon.

As always, Zaltys lifted the trapdoor, and looked down.

What she saw in the pit varied, though it was never pleasant. Sometimes she saw a writhing mass of snakes somehow forming a vaguely humanoid shape, with hissing hands reaching up to grasp her. Sometimes she saw a man with the hood of a cobra, dressed in a flowing black robe, with fingers that ended not in nails or even claws but in fangs dripping venom. Sometimes she saw a naked baby, crying out in the darkness at the bottom of a deep chasm.

This time, she saw the shadow serpent, and it wafted up toward the trapdoor like smoke on an updraft, its body coiling and spiraling as it came. *We are family*, the serpent whispered in her mind. *And nothing is more important than family*. The serpent opened its vast jaws, tongue flickering out to touch her face, and—

Zaltys jerked awake. The night was cool, though not cold—it was never cold so close to the jungle, which was nice, actually. No matter how many blankets she piled on herself during Delzimmer winters, she could never get warm, and so she spent months at a time feeling sluggish and torpid. Only time next to a roaring fire helped restore her during city winters. Her mother said she was more susceptible to cold than most because her people came from the jungle.

She rolled over, and found herself face-to-face with a snake. Its eyes gazed into hers, and its tongue flickered, not quite touching her, before it slithered off into the night.

It took a long time for Zaltys to sleep again, but when she did, there were no dreams.



“Wake up, lazyhead.” Zaltys nudged Julen in the ribs with her foot. He groaned and turned over, trying to pull his bedroll over his head. “Come on, unless you want a cart to crush you.”

He sat up, blinking, and looked around at the bustle of camp. Tents had been struck and carts loaded before dawn’s light fully overtook the sky, animals hitched and ready to start pulling, scouts sent in advance and behind and out to the sides to make sure no spies from

rival families were trying to track the caravan's progress. There were a few spies every year. They were invariably captured, given false memories by Glory to send their employers in the wrong direction, and set free to return home to sow disinformation.

Julen stared at her for a long moment. Then said: "Breakfast."

"Ha. If you want breakfast, you have to get up with the rest of the camp. We're moving out now. I'll show you which dangling fruit is safe to eat on the way."

He groaned and stood up, running a hand through his hair, which didn't improve its disarray. "Where are we going?"

"Onward into the jungle, Cousin."

"This is the jungle." He pointed in the direction of some trees, as if illustrating his point.

"This is the *edge* of the jungle, the end of the rocky soil. Today we go into the jungle proper."

"Fine. Where do I sit?"

Zaltys shook her head. "Mother says I'm to show you how things work here. That means you're coming with me and some of the scouts to make sure there are no nasty surprises waiting for us up ahead."

He stretched his arms overhead and worked the kinks out of his neck. "I don't suppose I have a choice."

"I suppose you *could* defy mother, one of the three heads of the family," Zaltys said thoughtfully. "It would be interesting to see what the consequences would be."

"Show me to my horse," he said.

Zaltys laughed. "Go into the jungle ahead of the caravan on horseback? It would be interesting to see the consequences of *that* too, except a dead horse isn't all that interesting." She smacked him on the back. "I hope you brought your good boots. We go on foot,

ahead of the trailbreakers, to make sure there's nothing unpleasant waiting for them."

"Like more shadow snakes?"

Zaltys tried not to let her face betray any emotion. "Those are very rare," she said. "But there are other things. Giant insects and spiders. Jungle cats. Carnivorous plants. Farther to the south—deeper than we ever go—there are supposed to be yuan-ti, but I've never met any. They say there used to be a small tribe of them near our route once, but they've been gone for ages."

"No people?" Julen said. "None of your, ah, original family?"

Zaltys shrugged. "There are tribes of halflings, but I'm a bit tall to pass for one of those." She grinned. "Quelamia thinks my people were either a very small, unknown tribe, or maybe just refugees who fled the upheavals and ended up living in the jungle for a while. They didn't last long, I guess. Certainly they didn't leave much of a mark."

"Who, or what, do you think ...?" He looked away.

"Killed my family?" She kept her voice light. "Hard to say. Could be any number of things. Krailash found me crying among the trees, the only one left alive, so I don't know who killed the others. I don't guess it matters. Dead is dead."

"Huh," Julen said.

Zaltys knew she was somewhat notorious in the family, so it was understandable that he was curious about her origins. At least he'd become more polite—when they'd been young children playing together he'd once stared at her intently and blurted out, "Why come you're so *brown*?" Adoptees weren't unheard of, and were even considered to strengthen the family by bringing in fresh blood—for one thing, they could marry their cousins without a greater-than-usual risk of bearing idiot children—but hers was certainly the most unusual adoption in recent memory. The only other truly colorful adoptee still living was her great-uncle Gustavus, a

lycanthrope that the Guardians had adopted in hopes of using him to frighten rivals; everyone was surprised when he showed an aptitude for bookkeeping instead, and they'd sent him to the Traders in exchange for a pair of sociopathic twins boys with no affinity for retail who'd later perished in a trade war with the Longspear cartel in Chavyondat. "Sorry," Julen said. "I don't mean to stir up bad memories, or ..."

"I was an infant when they found me, Cousin. I don't *have* any memories from that time. As far as memories go, I've been in the family as long as you have, and I've never known another life. I'm curious about my people, of course, but ... they're all gone. I'm just lucky I have a new family to call my own."

"We're happy to have you, Cousin," Julen said, a little awkwardly. Then he sighed. "Even if you do have a bizarre fondness for sleeping without a roof overhead."

"You'll get used to it," Zaltys said.

"That's what I'm afraid of," Julen replied.



The caravan proceeded. Julen was in no danger of surpassing Zaltys's skill as a ranger, but she had to admit that, interbranch family rivalry aside, the Guardians knew how to train their operatives. He pinned a platter-sized spider to a tree with a throwing knife—smirking at Zaltys and saying, "See, I have ranged weapons too,"—and helped her and the other forward scouts slash down a carnivorous vine that had grown across the barely-visible caravan path, showing no hesitation even when the bloodlike sap sprayed everywhere. He was clearly better suited to creeping through alleys, but he was adapting fairly well to the jungle environment.

"It's not so different from the city in terms of sight-lines," he mused as they ranged off to one side of the path to make sure there were no lurking hazards waiting to ambush the caravan. The trees there weren't as big as elsewhere in the jungle, but that meant more

sunlight could filter down, and as a result the jungle's fecundity was explosive, with smaller trees and plants growing so close together Zaltys sometimes had to turn sideways to slip between the trunks. "Down in the oldest part of the city especially, the houses are built so close together the alleyways are too tiny for grown humans to pass through at all, and the streets curve and twist, limiting your sight-lines. There are places where the roofs overlap, blocking out the sun." He glanced up at the green canopy above. "Of course, in the alleys, the worst you have to worry about is a mugger, not—I don't know—giant flesh-devouring beetles."

"The beetles aren't so bad," Zaltys said, pushing aside a low hanging branch and its freight of poisonous white flowers.

"Oh? So what's the worst thing you've ever had to face out here, then?" Julen said.

Zaltys considered. "It's hard to say. Deeper in the jungle you'll want to keep an eye on the trees above you as well as the ground below. There are apes who'll drop down from above and start pummeling you—we've even seen a few wearing fragments of old armor, guards of some abandoned ruin or another, I guess. They killed four of our scouts a few years ago. Krailash says there used to be yuan-ti near the prime terazul harvesting location, but he hasn't seen any of them in years, and I've never seen one, myself. Lots of snakes, but no snake people. I'm sure there are worse things farther from the caravan path—chokers, drakes, trolls and goblins, who knows, maybe even a dragon—but most thinking creatures learned to avoid this route long before I was born. Between mother, Krailash, Quelamia, and Glory, we're a lot more formidable than just about anything we're likely to encounter among the trees. All we get are the mindless creatures, blood-sucking vines and giant spiders and the like. It's a shame. It would be nice to have a challenge."

"Really?" he said, hacking at a thorn-encrusted vine. "And I was just thinking it would be nice to have a hot bath." He paused. "Who's Glory?"



The next tenday proceeded well, with Julen's presence the only notable difference from the previous year's excursion. Zaltys did her best to ignore the guards that followed her whenever she went into the woods, and rotated through the various scout groups, paying close attention to what the more experienced rangers and huntsmen and reconnaissance experts did, picking up a few fine points of tracking and teaching the basics to Julen, who continued to complain in a relatively good-natured way. One night after dinner—eaten with the guards, fortunately, as mother had given up her attempts at formal dining after that first night—Julen confided to her that learning naturecraft was no more boring than learning the list of approved poisons, and that struck Zaltys as high praise, coming from him.

They had lessons too, which Julen found annoying at first—"I thought out in the wilderness I could avoid *tutors*"—but he obviously enjoyed the weapons training with Krailash, though he sometimes fell asleep during Quelamia's monotone recitations of ancient historical fact. Glory, who'd long ago declared Zaltys hopeless at psionics, pronounced the same verdict on Julen, and settled down to teaching them what she *could*: which was mostly how to get your way by sweet-talking and manipulation, and how to subtly steer people toward a desirable course of action, and how to make people do what you wanted while making them think a given course was their own idea. After one such lesson—an especially bawdy one, complete with illustrative anecdotes about an emperor brought low by the machinations of one of his own councilors combined with his fondness for lovers of an inappropriate social class—Julen said, "They should bring her in to lecture to the Guardians!"

"They *do*," Zaltys said, amused. "Every year. You just don't remember her, though you remember the lessons, I'm sure."

"Don't remember who?" he said.



The caravan did not move swiftly, because it was a large operation, and took time to break camp in the morning and set up in the late afternoon. They couldn't streamline things much, because the deeper they got into the jungle, the more important it was to have proper defenses set up before nightfall, when the jungle came alive with menacing noises and the things making those noises. They also took a somewhat meandering route, and sent trailbreakers to hack false paths through the jungle (ideally leading to profoundly dangerous dead ends), and spent time covering their own tracks, all in order to frustrate the spies and followers they assumed were tracing their trail.

After two tendays, though, they'd reached the main terazul harvesting site, and set up the more-or-less permanent camp that would be their home for the next month.

And that meant it was almost time for Zaltys's initiation day. Her mother, in consultation with the other elders of the family, had decided Zaltys was old enough to become a full member of the family—no longer a dependent, but an adult in her own right, with attendant rights and responsibilities. It was a significant coming-of-age in the Serrat family, usually celebrated with lavish parties, but Zaltys wanted to celebrate in the jungle, where she felt most at home, and where most of her work for the family would take place.

The camp as a whole didn't take any notice of that particular milestone—the caravan was a working operation, with scouts and sentries keeping watch, laborers plucking the blossoms from the terazul vines and filling their baskets, which in turn filled the enclosed carts that had once held food, gradually emptying to make room for more precious cargo as the caravan moved forward. Indeed, the special day was like any other until that evening, when her mother's spirit boar came and sniffed at her legs and led her back to the center of camp.

Krailash, Quelamia, Glory, Julen, and her mother were all waiting by the same long dining table they'd used for their formal dinner, though, fortunately, without the crystal and porcelain used that

time. Her mother embraced her and kissed her cheek. “My daughter,” she said. “Seventeen years ago, Krailash brought you to me from the jungle, and changed my life.”

“Mine too,” Zaltys said, to general laughter.

“You have served the family well,” Alaia said solemnly. “You have worked tirelessly for our prosperity, and proven yourself an asset to the Serrats as a whole, and the Travelers in particular. It is with great pleasure that I formally induct you into the highest circle of the family, as an adult in your own right, with all the rights and privileges that status entails.” Eyes shining with tears, Alaia kissed Zaltys on one cheek, then the other, and embraced her. Zaltys very nearly wept herself.

“I’d say you’re old enough to take your wine unwatered,” Alaia said, and poured straw-colored wine into a wooden cup, handing it over to Zaltys. “Though not too much. Krailash wants you on patrol tomorrow. For now, though: let’s raise our glasses to Zaltys, trade princess, heir to the Travelers, and ranger of the wild places.”

They all recited her name and took the ritual drink, and then Alaia said, “I think that’s all, unless there’s something I’m forgetting.”

Zaltys didn’t say anything. It was traditional to give gifts to a family member being raised to adult status, and she was *fairly* sure her mother was just teasing.

“Oh, yes,” Alaia said after a long moment, giving a small smile. “You probably expect a gift or two. I think we may have a few small things.”

Glory presented her with a small carved box, which held a ring of delicate blue crystal that glowed with inner light.

“It’s beautiful,” Zaltys said, lifting the ring from the box and looking at its gently pulsing glow. “This is too nice, Glory, I can’t —”

“It’s a psychic ring,” she said. “Well, the *ring* isn’t psychic, but it can grant a tiny bit of power to even a hopeless psionic case like you.

You know how I can speak directly to your mind, sending my thoughts into your head?” She nodded to the ring. “With this, you can do the same thing. It continually gathers your mental energy, but sending thoughts isn’t easy, so it will take a day or so to recharge after each use. And it won’t help you *receive* thoughts, but, well—if you ever need to whisper a secret or get a message to someone without being overheard, this can help.” She closed Zaltys’s hand over the ring. “Happy initiation. Welcome to the horror of having real responsibilities.”

Next Krailash approached, holding a long bow case, pale wood inlaid with sigils in some reflective black substance like the night-made glass, with hinges of gold. “I have carried this for decades,” the dragonborn rumbled. “It was an inheritance from an elven archer I campaigned with, long before I began working for the Serrat family. Before he died, that elf told me to keep this until I found an archer who deserved to wield such a fine weapon.” He opened the case, revealing a delicate recurve bow made of carefully bent bone and wood and horn. “The bow, I’m told, is made of wood from a tree that grows only in places where the Shadowfell touches the mortal plane, and the bones of a phase beast, and exotic sinews, and other things. It is imbued with old magics. I saw it loosed often in battle, Zaltys, and the arrows that flew from this bow seemed to take no notice of obstacles, flickering to pass through walls and pillars and the trunks of trees, and though the arrows did not always strike their targets, they *did* strike targets that no other arrow could have reached. Indeed, in one pitched battle when the archer ran out of arrows, I saw him shoot a spear, a short sword, and a fireplace poker from this bow, and they all flew as straight as arrows would. It’s an extraordinary weapon, and wasted in my clumsy hands. But you are worthy of this bow, and I give this to you.” He inclined his head, closed the bow case, and handed it over.

Zaltys stared at the case. She had very fine weapons, made by master craftsmen, but a *magic* bow ...

“My gift is a good match for that weapon,” Quelamia said. “Though you may thank *yourself*, to some extent, Zaltys.” She lifted up a pannier from the ground by her chair and opened it, drawing out a set of deep gray-black leather armor.

“Is that made from the skin of the shadow snake?” Julen blurted.

“It is,” Quelamia said. “I had thought, at first, to make you armor enchanted with the magic of the Feywild, but when I was given this skin, and told you had slain it yourself, it seemed appropriate. I am not knowledgeable about Shadow Magic, but I know this armor will fit you beautifully, and should enable you to slip through shadows as the serpent itself once did, and to vanish from sight in the shade, and blows that strike this armor may sometimes fail to land on you at all, passing harmlessly through shadow.”

Zaltys had been wearing her newest set of supple hunting leathers for over a year, and they had come to seem almost like a second skin, but she would give them up in an instant for something as beautiful as this shadow armor—though she felt some twinge at the thought of wearing the flesh of a serpent that had once spoken in her mind. But wasn’t it almost a way of honoring the snake, of making its death meaningful? “Quelamia ... I am honored.”

“Yes,” Quelamia said serenely, and then departed, apparently finished with the party once her part was done.

“I want to give you this knife,” Julen said, offering her one of his throwing daggers, hilt-first. It was a beautiful weapon, impeccably balanced, with a jewel at the base of the hilt and a blade that was treated so that it didn’t reflect even a glimmer of light, and would fly through the night invisibly. “It’s not magical or anything. If I had a magical dagger, no offense, I’d keep it for myself.”

Zaltys laughed and gave him a hug, then looked at Alaia. Her mother raised one eyebrow. “Are you wondering about *my* gift? Well, it is both a gift, and a burden. You are no longer a child, and so, I have an adult responsibility for you: I am making you head of

the rangers and the scouts for the Travelers. You will organize their schedules and direct their actions.”

Zaltys stared, then practically leaped into her mother’s arms, squeezing her tightly. “Does this mean no more guards shadowing me everywhere?”

“Not unless you assign them yourself,” Krailash said. “Your mother talked it over with me, and I have no objection. You know this terrain as well as the best scouts we have—better than I do myself, truthfully. Technically you will report to me, as I remain head of security, but in practice, I will let you run things to your liking. Come by my trailer in the morning and I’ll show you how the rotation has been set up, and I can answer any questions you might have.”

Alaia patted Zaltys’s back and stepped out of the embrace. She’d never been terribly comfortable with physical affection. “Do well with this position, Zaltys, and you will go a long way toward proving yourself worthy of leading the Travelers and sitting in on the family’s high councils.”

“Lucky you,” Glory said. “Your mother’s gift is more *work*, and that makes you happy. I’ll never understand your family.”

Zaltys stuck out her tongue at the tiefling, then took her mother’s hand in her own. “I will not disappoint you, Alaia Serrat,” she said formally.

Her mother kissed her cheek. “I know, darling. Now, run along with your cousin—I’m sure you’d like to try out your new weapons and make him jealous.”

“It’s all right,” Julen said. “I’ve been promised father’s third-best sword when I come of age.” He sighed. “You’re lucky to be an only child, Zaltys.” He walked out of the circle of torchlight, talking to Glory in a low voice.

Before Zaltys could leave, Alaia touched her arm, and drew in close. “Celebrate tonight, my daughter. But tomorrow, come and sit with

me. There are some things you should know. Things it's time you learned. That you *deserve* to know."

"Family secrets?" Zaltys said, smiling.

"Something like that," Alaia said.



After dressing in her new armor and slipping on her new ring—its blue glow was hidden by some properties of the shadowy armor—Zaltys strung her new bow by the archery butts Krailash had set up to keep the troops in practice. In truth, despite her boasting to Julen, the jungle was rough going for archers, since the trees were so dense and provided so many obstacles to a clear shot. But Zaltys had always turned that to her advantage, firing from concealment and from high in the branches of trees, excelling as a sniper and secret hunter. With her new armor and the bow, it almost felt *unfair* for her to have such advantages.

But she knew temple guardian apes and shambling mounds wouldn't hesitate to use any advantage they could get over *her*, so why should she feel guilty?

Julen watched her try out her new bow, clapping and making appreciative noises as she tested its capabilities on the straw targets. Night was falling, though, and archery was less enjoyable by torchlight, especially for spectators, so she acceded to Julen's suggestion that they sit and talk awhile.

They walked to the far northern edge of camp, just outside the perimeter of carts but well inside the shifting protective fence of guards out in the woods. They sat on a couple of mossy boulders, and Julen grinned. "Look what I have." He drew a small bottle of wine from a bag, along with a pair of wooden cups.

"Did you steal that?" He *was* doubtless trained in a dozen forms of larceny, and it *was* a nice gesture, but pillaging caravan supplies was a bad idea.

“No, it was a gift from, ah ...” he frowned. “Someone. She said a woman with all your responsibilities should be able to drink all the unwatered wine she wants, and that we should celebrate your new position. I wish I could remember who it was.”

“It’s okay, I think I know.” Zaltys took the bottle, uncorked it, and sniffed, flickering out her tongue as she did so. The liquid inside had a hint of spiciness, and she knew, even in the dimness, that it would be bright red, some of Glory’s tiefling fire-wine. Something best drunk in moderation, no doubt, but a nice gesture nonetheless. And Glory was right—Zaltys *should* celebrate. The work began tomorrow, but until then, it was the pure pleasure of achieving one of her dreams.

Zaltys poured her cousin a cup and then one for herself, and after their initial gasps at the strength of the wine, they sipped in eye-watering silence for a while. Finally Julen said, “I’m sorry my gift wasn’t as good as the others.”

She waved her hand. “Don’t be silly, Cousin. It was very generous and thoughtful of you, and it’s appreciated. I’ll be sure to send you something when you come of age in a couple of years.” He leaned back on a log. “So. Heir to the Travelers. The backbone of the family fortune, at least, according to the Travelers, though it’s funny, the Guardians say the same thing, and I bet the Traders do too. Still, that’s got to be a weight on your shoulders.”

“It’s what I’ve been training for my entire life,” she said seriously. “I learned how to supply a caravan before I learned to read. I was taught how to scout the jungle and lay false trails before I was taught multiplication. It will be an honor to serve my family.”

“Easy for the heir apparent to say.” Julen took a sip of wine and coughed, eyes watering, then grinned. “I’m so far down in the pecking order sometimes I think my father’s forgotten my name. Oh, they’ve taught me all sorts of things—lockpicking, poisoning, how to tell if someone’s lying, how to creep around. But no one’s grooming me for leadership.”

“I’m sure they’ll find a place for you,” Zaltys said. It was hard to think of Julen as an adult, though he was very nearly. They’d played together as children, and in part of her mind, he was still the laughing boy with jam smudged on his face, racing through the gardens.

Julen shrugged. “Probably. Everyone in the family has to pull their weight, and being a Guardian is a proud and noble thing, and so forth. There’s talk of apprenticing me to my eldest brother. He does business with dwarves and even drow sometimes. He’s always going down into caves and mines and tunnels.” He made a face. “Sounds even worse than living in the jungle, honestly. I was hoping for a posting to one of our trading partners across the gulf, some city where I can enjoy myself, out from under father’s thumb. But he keeps giving me scrolls and books to read about the Underdark lately, so I think they’re serious about apprenticing me. Sending me out here to the jungle is supposed to help me toughen up or get practical experience or something.” He belched.

“Practical experience in getting drunk, maybe,” Zaltys said with a laugh.

“I’m counting on you to be my teacher in this as in all things,” he said with a grin.

CHAPTER SEVEN

ZALTYS WOKE UP WITH A COTTONY TONGUE AND A thudding head. She sat up by the fading ashes of the fire, moaned, and picked up a canteen, sloshing the water around in her mouth for a while before swallowing. The sun was barely up, but by the standards of the camp, she was running late. She needed to get to Krailash's cart and see about those rotations.

One of the sentries posted by the barrier carts shouted in alarm, and Zaltys sprang to her feet and raced in his direction. (Her mother had commented often on her tendency to run *toward* danger.) "What's happening here?" she said. Three sentries were crowded together, their backs to Zaltys. One of them, a young man new to the caravan, turned, and his eyes widened. "Ah, an intruder, he somehow made it past the men posted in the woods."

"Let me see," Zaltys said, clambering up on the back of the cart so she could look down on their prisoner, who was on his knees, his hands raised in a show of helplessness. The guards had their spears leveled at him, but the man hardly looked a threat—he resembled one of the homeless drunkards who slept in the alleys of Delzimmer, his clothes filthy rags, hair a long and tangled mass, beard like a ragged pelt clinging to his face. His pale hands trembled, and with red-rimmed eyes, he gazed up at Zaltys and babbled something. Half the sounds were guttural and harsh, but interspersed were recognizable words and phrases: "darkness," "caves," "slaves," "cages," "trapped," "help me,"—and "Krailash."

Zaltys narrowed her eyes. "You, new man. Go and get Krailash. And tell my mother someone has wandered in."

"Yes, Krailash," the prisoner said, and then put his head in his hands, and began to weep and sob and speak again in that strange

guttural tongue.

Quelamia arrived suddenly in that soundless, subtle way she had, stepping up to the back of the cart to stand beside Zaltys. “Oh, my,” she said. “That’s Deep Speech.”

“What?” Zaltys said.

“Undercommon,” Quelamia said. “The trade language of the denizens of the Underdark.”

“He’s awfully pale to be a drow,” Zaltys said.

“Human,” Quelamia said. “I can always tell a human.”

Julen clambered up on the cart too. “Wow!” he said. “I heard they caught a spy!”

“You think he’s a spy?” Zaltys said. “He looks ... crazy. Sick. Lost.”

“Good disguise for a spy,” Julen said, crunching an apple, chewing, and swallowing. “You know? Send someone in as a poor lost wanderer or jungle refugee in need of help, hoping we’ll take care of him, and give him a chance to see what we do in camp, learn our secrets, all that.”

Krailash arrived, axe in hand, and pushed through the barrier carts. “What’s this, then?”

The prisoner lifted his face and stared at Krailash. He shouted wordlessly and flung himself toward the dragonborn, clutching one of his scaled legs and weeping against his knee. Krailash grunted. “Were you lost in the jungle, my friend?”

The man looked up. “Krailash,” he said, and the dragonborn stiffened. “I have been lost in the *dark*. I never thought I’d find you again.”

“Rainer,” Krailash breathed, then began bellowing, shouting at his men to lower their spears, to fetch blankets and food and water, to bring Alaia, to go *now*. Zaltys gaped as Krailash picked up the prisoner and strode off toward the center of the camp, carrying the man like a father cradling a baby.

Julen took another bite of his apple, watching them depart. “Who’s Rainer?”

“He was a guard,” Quelamia said. “He disappeared a long time ago. We’d assumed he was killed. Apparently he just got lost.”

“Lucky he was able to find the camp again,” Julen said.

“Yes.” Quelamia had a faraway look on her face, but then, she usually did. “Quite remarkable, actually. Almost unbelievable.” She hopped off the cart—she somehow managed to do it gracefully—and moved off after Krailash.

“Are mornings always this exciting?” Julen said.

“People hardly ever wander in out of the woods and then hug our chief of security,” Zaltys said.

“More’s the pity,” Julen said. “Funniest thing I’ve seen in ages.”



Zaltys was hoping to find out more about the man, but he was taken into Alaia’s cart, along with Krailash and Glory, and when Zaltys knocked, her mother irritably told her to come back later, they were busy. So much for being a full member of the family, she thought, and went out to walk the perimeter. She looked for Julen, thinking she could teach him about the camp’s defenses, but he was nowhere to be seen—apparently the Guardians taught you how to avoid work along with how to pick locks and poison knives. The jungle beckoned—she wanted to try out her new gifts, especially since no guards would trail after her—but she was unwilling to leave when the camp was buzzing with rumors and speculation about the wild man who’d somehow cheated death.

A few hours later Zaltys found Glory near the cook tent, gnawing a rib bone and frowning. Zaltys sat down on the rough wooden bench across from the tiefling and said, “Is that man all right? Rainer?”

Glory grunted. “I scanned his mind. Ugly mess in there. Very dark. Lots of mental blocks, which I didn’t care to push through, because who wants to see what kind of horrible snakepits of memory he’s

had to cover up? He is who he says, though, as far as I can tell. Poor bastard.”

“He was underground?” Zaltys said, horrified. “All this time?”

“You know about the Underchasm,” Glory said.

Zaltys nodded. “Where all that land collapsed.” The Underchasm was a pit the size of a sea, collapsed in the great upheavals that had made Delzimmer a coastal city.

“What do you think all that land collapsed *into*?” Glory said. “There are vast caverns beneath us. The Underdark.” She shuddered. “Rainer’s been down there.”

“What, lost?”

“Enslaved,” Glory said. She tossed the bone, picked clean, on the ground for the camp dogs. “His mind’s a wreck, but he’s in good shape physically. Toiling for monsters underground is good exercise. Be careful if you go out in the woods. Whatever monsters took Rainer and dragged him underground could be looking for him.” She yawned. “Probing his mind was too much like work. They had me clean things up in there a bit too, so he could maybe sleep again someday. I couldn’t take away all the bad experiences, though, not without turning him into nothing but a body without thought or will. The bad experiences are too much a part of who he is. Ugly business. I need a nap.” Glory rose and sauntered away.

Zaltys went to her mother’s wagon, knocked on the door, and entered at her mother’s call.

Alaia looked up from her folding desk, where she was writing a letter. “Oh, hello, dear,” she said absently. “Quite a lot of commotion this morning, hmm?”

Zaltys unfolded one of the camp chairs tucked into a corner and sat down. “Is that man all right? Rainer?”

Her mother sighed. “For a certain value of ‘all right,’ I suppose so. He went through terrible ordeals, things we can’t even imagine. But

Glory was able to soothe him a bit.”

“What will happen to him now?” She thought of the broken men she saw sometimes in Delzimmer, begging for coins by the harbor or just sitting, blank-faced, in empty doorways. Would that be Rainer’s fate?

“He was lost and injured while in the employ of the family,” Alaia said. “So the family will care for him, just as we would for a laborer crippled in the fields or a soldier maimed in our service. He’ll always have a livelihood in our employ.”

“He won’t ... He can’t become a guard again.”

Alaia shook her head. “He was one of Krailash’s best men, but that was long ago. If he recovers fully and he wants to—but no. I think, once the family physicians and healers have made sure he’s not too ill, he will be given some less difficult task to do. A position in one of the households, or working in the gardens or kitchens. And if he’s not up to even that much work ... Don’t worry, he’ll be kept comfortable.”

Comfortable. Zaltys imagined him sitting in a chair at a window, staring out at some peaceful vista, his mind broken. “Where is he now?”

Alaia gestured vaguely northward. “I sent him back to Delzimmer on horseback with a couple of the guards. Having him here in the camp, talking about slavers stealing people away into the darkness ... I didn’t want him worrying the laborers. And, besides, I’m sure he wants as much distance between himself and this jungle as possible.”

Zaltys touched the hilt of the knife at her belt. “But shouldn’t we be worried about slavers? Glory said whoever took Rainer might be looking for him—”

Alaia put her pen down and massaged her writing hand, wincing as she pulled each finger and made the knuckles pop. “Glory enjoys making people worried and uncomfortable. But, yes, I’ve posted

more sentries around the camp, and Krailash is letting his people know they should be alert. If any nasty creatures do come boiling up out of a hole in the ground, we'll drive them back. Now, my darling daughter, if you don't mind, I need to write a few more letters, to arrange for Rainer's care back in Delzimmer." Alaia shooed her away, so Zaltys folded up her chair and left the wagon.

She decided to go looking for Krailash, but she found Julen along the way, squatting in the shadow of a supply cart, an array of glittering bits of metal spread out on a cloth before him. Zaltys crouched down beside him, though she stayed out of the shade. Unlike most of the other people in camp, she didn't mind the heat of the sun pounding down on the clearing. "What's all this?"

"Lockpicks," he said, holding up a narrow twist of black metal and squinting at it. "I had to leave home in a hurry, and I wanted to make sure I didn't forget anything." He sighed. "Not that there are any locks worth speaking of to practice on out here. What with the general lack of *doors*. My skills are going to get all rusty out here in the wilderness. I don't know how I'll pass my practical exam this fall. At least I'll be able to keep up with my poisons and knife-throwing—no end of nasty creatures out here to kill, at least. And I'm sure I'll be bitten by dozens of horrible animals, which can't hurt in developing my resistance to poisons. Did you know in the Guardians we eat tiny amounts of poison for breakfast every day, to build up immunities? We're supposed to carry a ridiculous array of antidotes and anti-venoms with us too. I must say, I prefer the bits of the job that involve knives." He rolled up the cloth of lockpicks and tucked it away in a small traveler's pack.

"You Guardians and your toys," Zaltys said, shaking her head.

He snorted. "This from a woman with a clutch of magical arrows in her quiver?"

She laughed. "Where have you been keeping yourself all day?"

Julen looked around, then beckoned her closer. Zaltys obligingly leaned in. "I was belly-down on the roof of your mother's wagon,

my ear right next to the chimney, eavesdropping,” he said.

Zaltys widened her eyes. “You were spying on my *mother*?”

Her cousin had the good grace to look sheepish, but only for a moment. Then he frowned. “That’s what the Guardians *do*. We listen to things we aren’t supposed to overhear. We gather secrets.”

“Spying on your own family, Julen, that’s low.”

“Ah. So you don’t want to know what I found out then?”

Zaltys settled down beside him, leaning against a cartwheel. “Well. I didn’t say *that*. They were talking about Rainer?”

“They were,” he said. “And talking with Rainer too.” Julen played with a thick silver coin, walking it across the backs of his fingers, making it appear and disappear. He really did have agile hands. The Guardians had to practice their skills just as much as Zaltys had to practice archery, she supposed. “I don’t know. I think the man might be mad. He said he escaped the place where he was imprisoned, and wandered lost in the tunnels for a while, until a *snake* led him to the surface.”

Zaltys grunted. “That’s unusually helpful, for a snake.”

“Yes. I think he probably hallucinated the snake, but who knows? He didn’t make much sense at first, but then ...” He frowned. “Someone talked to him. I can’t remember who.”

Glory, Zaltys thought.

“Anyway, after that, he got more lucid, was able to answer questions, explain what happened to him. Zaltys, did you know he held you in his arms when you were just an infant?”

She blinked. “Rainer? He was one of the guards who found me? But why didn’t my mother tell me that? Or introduce me to him?”

Julen shrugged. “I’m not sure. I don’t really understand it. The day Rainer was taken by slavers—it was the same day they *found* you.”

“You’re sure?”

“That’s what he said. ‘After we found the baby, they dragged me down.’ ”

“I wonder if the slavers who took him were the same creatures who killed my village?” Zaltys said.

“Ah. They ... Zaltys, the story I always heard was that you were found among the dead, the only survivor of a massacre.”

“Yes, that’s right,” she said. No one liked to talk to Zaltys much about the day she’d been found, saying it was a sad and tragic time, but she’d managed to extract that much information from them: that she was the sole survivor of a murdered village.

Julen shook his head. “But that’s not what Rainer *said*. He was telling them what happened, and he started with the day he was taken, and there was nothing about finding any other bodies. He and Krailash heard you cry out in the jungle, and they went to investigate, and found you in the ruins, but no one else. There were bloodstains on the stones, and the teeth of monsters broken and scattered on the ground, but your people weren’t massacred. They were enslaved, Rainer says. Taken by the same creatures who took *him*.”

Zaltys shook her head. “No, that’s not ... That’s not how it happened, that’s not what they *told* me. Julen, I’ve visited the grave site, it’s this great heap of dirt and stone, they buried my whole village in a pit.”

“People lie, Zaltys,” Julen said gently. “Serrats more than most, maybe.”

“But *why*? Why tell me my family was dead?”

“Maybe it was easier?” Julen said. “Kinder? To let you think they were dead, instead of down there, in the Underdark. With the derro. Rainer and Krailash were making sure the slavers were gone, and when Rainer got separated from Krailash for a moment, the harvesters sprang on him from a crack in the ground, bound him with shackles, and pulled him into the caverns below.”

“Derro,” Zaltys whispered. She’d heard of them, of course, but they were a bogeyman, a threat, moon-white underdwellers said to hide in dark basements and enslave disobedient children, who would be forced into an eternity of shoveling coal into hellish furnaces if they didn’t attend their etiquette lessons or failed to address a family elder with proper respect. She hadn’t really considered that they might be *real*. “If he ... wait ... did Rainer see my family down there?”

“He didn’t say. And your mother didn’t ask, at least, not that I heard. Rainer said there were other human slaves, though, along with snake people, bullywugs, kuo-toa, and creatures he couldn’t identify. The slaves labored in mushroom fields, harvesting food, and were used as live bait to catch horrible blind fish the derro like to eat, and sent in to do war against the enemies of the derro, which are, I gather, everyone in the world. Rainer says the creatures are mad, and coming from someone as broken up as he is, that’s saying something. He said he saw horrible things in the service of the derro.” Julen shook his head. “They fought the servants of gods whose names have been forgotten by the surface world. Living pools of blood. Creatures with wings like razors. Beholders. Purple worms, and once, a purple dragon. He finally saw a chance to escape in a recent battle, hid in the tunnels, and started following a snake because he had no other idea where to go. The snake led him to fresh air, and a crack in the rock, and once he reached the surface, he wandered until he found some river that leads to a waterfall—”

“Shattered Rainbow Falls,” Zaltys murmured. “It’s a day’s walk, but it’s beautiful there.”

“Yes. From there, he knew the way to the caravan site, and that’s how he found us.”

Zaltys stood, swaying a little from the hard wind of the revelations Julen had brought. “But if Rainer survived all these years, then my family might still be alive down there. In the dark. In thrall to monsters. If that’s true, family is the most important thing. It’s the

one thing in this world I know to be true, family is *everything*.” She shook her head. “But he’s probably just crazy. I’m sure his mind is a mess, he must be misremembering, it was nearly twenty years ago, after all. What if he’s just mad? Mistaken?”

“It’s possible,” Julen conceded. “But he sounded sane enough, once he calmed down, and one thing followed another in his story pretty clearly. We’ll probably never know.”

“No. I *have* to know. I need the truth,” she said.

Julen spread his hands. “How? If your mother and the others were lying to you, how can you trust anything they say if you confront them?”

She nodded. “You’re right. I can’t just ask. So I have to go look. I have to go find *out* if my original family is dead.”

“How do we do that? Investigate a crime almost two decades old?”

“It’s easy,” Zaltys said. “We do it with *shovels*.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

JULEN LEANED ON HIS SHOVEL AND WIPED HIS BROW. Zaltys had waited until nightfall to sneak away and investigate, which had given Julen ample time to convince her to bring him along. “I wish someone had given you a magical earth-moving pickaxe for your initiation.”

“At least the shadow armor doesn’t get dirty,” Zaltys replied, driving the shovel down again. She stood in a hole so deep that only her shoulders and head were aboveground, and she was beginning to think she’d never find the thing she both hoped and dreaded to discover.

“Are you sure this is the right place?” Julen looked around at the canted walls, the shattered stone, and the fragments of unsettling carvings.

“I asked, long ago, where my family and the rest of the village was buried. Krailash brought me to this place, and said Quelamia had covered over their grave with earth and stone by magic. They picked this ruined structure because it was so recognizable, and would be easy to find, if I ever wanted to see it. I come every year. I leave flowers. And now? I’m beginning to think there aren’t any bodies buried under here at all. And if there are no bodies ...”

“Then this isn’t a grave. And Alaia has been lying to you. And that means your village wasn’t killed, but taken.” Julen drove down with his shovel—and then yelped. Zaltys snapped her head up to look at him, and saw the shovel handle vanish from his hands. A moment later Julen burst out of his own shoulder-deep hole and scrambled away. “Zaltys! I hit something, or, I mean, I hit *nothing*—I broke through into some kind of cavern, and, ah, the shovel fell in. Sorry. I was surprised, and lost my grip.”

“Come on,” Zaltys said, without hesitation. She grabbed his hand and dragged him away from the temple, into the dark jungle. There were things among the trees worthy of her fear, but the only fear she felt was for whatever might be in the caverns beneath what she’d always believed was her original family’s final resting place.

Quelamia hadn’t buried her kinsmen. She’d buried the entry to the Underdark the slavers had used to breach the surface.

Julen gasped, trying to keep up as Zaltys pulled him through the jungle. She ran swiftly, her night vision exceptional as always, and then it occurred to her to step into a shadow. A sudden sensation of cold, a blur in her vision, and an instant later she emerged from another shadow, farther away. “No fair!” Julen said. “Some of us are stuck using our feet!”

Zaltys waited for him to catch up, and resisted the urge to step through more shadows, at least until they reached the edge of camp. “Stay here,” she said, and stepped toward a shadow cast by one of the ever-burning perimeter torches.

Julen caught her arm. “Where are you going?”

She didn’t look at him, or at anything in particular; she looked inward. “To get food, and rope, and an everburning torch, and a few potions, and a sword, and—”

“You’re going into the caves?” he said. “Zaltys, you *can’t*. Rainer was a hardened warrior, and it nearly killed him.”

“If my family is down there—my *real* family—I have to save them.”

“We’re your real family, Zaltys. I am.”

Her bleakness receded for a moment, and she met his eyes. “Yes, Cousin. You are. But so are they. If family is everything, how can I leave my family trapped in the dark? Enslaved? Mother, father, maybe brothers, sisters, aunts, uncles, *cousins*? I can’t.”

“Let’s talk to Krailash, then, organize a party, perhaps send a rider to bring back Rainer so he can tell us what to expect—”

“They’d never let me go down there tonight. They only just agreed to let me walk in the woods without an escort, Julen. They ... it’s not *their* family, Julen. It’s mine. I have to do this.”

“At least wait until morning!” There was desperation in his voice.

“My family hasn’t seen a morning in seventeen years,” she said. “It’s always night in the Underdark.” She stepped into a shadow, and vanished from sight.



From the moment Julen first saw Zaltys in the camp, with her black hair pulled back from her face and tied up with a cord, dressed in dirty hunting leathers that couldn’t hide her trim and somehow sinuous shape, with those startlingly large, deep, intelligent green eyes and a little half-smile on her lips, Julen was lost. Oh, he’d admired her back in Delzimmer too, and of all the pretty cousins he’d looked on and fantasized about, she was foremost, but seeing her here, in her element, the longing for her had struck him like a physical blow to the chest. His initial attraction deepened into full infatuation as he saw how she handled a bow and knife, observed her utter mastery of the jungle pathways, and sparred with her verbally. By the time the first tenday in the field was over, he’d decided Zaltys was the woman he wanted to marry.

Falling in love with *anyone* was a luxury generally denied to the family, and falling in love with such a close relative was ill-advised at best. But the restrictions on first-cousin relationships were waived when one member was an adoptee, and he could come up with sound strategic reasons to forge a fresh marriage bond between the Travelers and the Guardians of the family—perhaps even reasons his hardheaded father would concede. Of course the head of the Travelers spent half the year out in the field, a circumstance not conducive to marital harmony and one of the obvious reasons Alaia had never wed despite various close calls, but Julen was confident they could adapt to and overcome the difficulties of the circumstances. Assuming he could get Zaltys to look at him as anything other than her little cousin.

He was not even quite two years younger than her, and he was trying hard to make her laugh and impress her with his ability to avoid being eaten by giant spiders and carnivorous vines, but the most he'd gotten from her in terms of affection was a pat on the back and some ruffled hair. He still might have simply enjoyed and agonized in the frustrated bliss of being so close to the untouchable object of his affection, but the prospect of a summer spent insinuating his way into her affections suddenly seemed in danger. Of *course* Zaltys wanted to charge into the Underdark, despite her total ignorance of the realm and its dangers, to save some people she'd never met, just because they happened to be related by an accident of blood. Julen could have told her that birth parents weren't so great—his own mother was essentially a work of art observed from afar, a beautifully-attired and impossibly distant matron who spent most of her time in her chambers with her lady's maids, while his father was a more frequent and altogether more harrowing presence in his life. But Zaltys hadn't given him the chance to make those arguments, nor would they have meant much to her anyway, he suspected.

When she vanished, leaving him alone on the edge of the camp, his first thought was to go to Alaia and warn her, but he knew Zaltys would perceive that as a betrayal, and it would ruin any chance he had of being more than a soft city boy in her eyes. He considered going to Krailash, in hopes of enlisting his help to intercept Zaltys and convince her not to do anything impulsive, but he knew the dragonborn would tell his mistress what her daughter had tried to do, so betrayal would still be an issue. Besides, Zaltys would be hard to hold, given the capabilities of the armor Quelamia had made for her, and she was the kind of person who would exert heroic effort to do something she'd been ordered not to do.

So there was nothing for it. Julen would just have to go after Zaltys on his own. He didn't have her ability to step from shadow to shadow, but he could move pretty fast when the need arose, and she'd have to spend some time digging to widen the hole his shovel had fallen through sufficiently to squeeze herself through. He

entered camp and made his way to his campsite, near the inner ring of carts, and picked up his pack. The bag seemed unusually heavy, so he opened it up, and frowned at what he saw inside.

In addition to his clothes and spare knives and antitoxins and lockpicks, there was a pouch of trail rations; flint and steel; an everburning torch; a piece of blue chalk; and a small clear crystal bottle with a stopper. The latter looked sort of familiar, but surely it couldn't be ... He pulled the stopper and tipped some of the clear fluid inside onto the ground. The level of water in the bottle didn't change at all. His father had a bottle much like this one, though the crystal was a different color; he jokingly called it his drought insurance. That bottle had a connection to the plane of elemental water, and would pour forth pure water forever, albeit in a small trickle. It was a powerful magic item, and now someone had given him its twin. He continued digging through the bag and found, sheathed, a small dagger that wasn't his own. When he drew the knife, he was surprised to see the blade was bound in verdigris, and the hilt worked with a pattern of green enameled leaves and vines. A green jewel set in the hilt of the dagger pulsed with a gentle light when his thumb touched it, and his eyes widened. The dagger was magical. What it did, exactly, he didn't know, but it was no ordinary knife. It was a gift from someone who wished to remain anonymous, obviously.

That meant he had an ally in camp, someone who knew he was going to go into the Underdark, presumably—someone who knew *Zaltys* was going there too. Who could know such a thing? There was a psion somewhere in camp—he'd never met her—charged with erasing the memories of the laborers and guards after the caravan returned to Delzimmer, so they couldn't reveal the secret location of the terazul vines. It was said some psions could perceive possible futures, so perhaps the mysterious figure had seen a vision of *Zaltys's* quest. Or it could be the wizard *Quelamia*—she was an eladrin, an otherworldly race that had untold powers, and she certainly seemed to know more about everything than anyone else. And, of course, *Alaia* was a shaman with a profound connection to

the natural world and the ability to observe the actions of others in secret through the eyes of her spirit companions, but what motive would any of them have to help him pursue Zaltys? Why wouldn't they simply stop her?

He didn't have time to think about it. If he was going to catch up with Zaltys before she lost him in the caverns underground, he needed to move.

Julen shouldered his pack and headed nonchalantly for the perimeter, past the guards and laborers who took no notice of him, hiding once behind a cart while Krailash went striding by on some errand or another. He wasn't supposed to leave camp unescorted, since even the seventh heir to the Guardians was a valuable commodity, and if any of the guards had seen him, they would have stopped him.

But he wasn't a child. He was an operative trained by the best agents in the Guardians, and if he didn't want to be seen, no one in camp would see him.



Someone in camp did see him creep off into the jungle, though not with ordinary eyes, and that watcher smiled. Things were moving forward as expected. Events underground would be unpredictable, and it might all still end in tragedy, but there was reason to be hopeful. Justice might yet be done, and order restored, and catastrophic futures of madness and death averted. Giving Julen the knife instead of Zaltys was a gamble, but if Zaltys failed, perhaps Julen could succeed in her place. That would be sad, of course, and would annoy the other party to the arrangement, but the watcher was concerned only with results, not with the cost of attaining those results.

Being concerned with anything else, given the situation, was a sure path to heartbreak.

CHAPTER NINE

ALAIA WASN'T IN HER WAGON, FORTUNATELY, SO ZALTYS was able to fill her pack in peace and take a few of the healing potions kept in the emergency stores in her mother's locked chest. Once she'd finished packing—her hands shaking with anxiety, excitement, and other, less identifiable emotions—she almost stepped into a shadow, but she stopped by her mother's little folding desk first.

Zaltys sat down, pulled the writing surface down and locked it into place, opened a drawer, and took out one of the small sheets of paper her mother used to write messages to send back to the city. She dipped a pen in her mother's inkwell, considered, and wrote a few brief lines. She folded the paper and wrote her mother's name on it, then took another sheet, and wrote a slightly longer note. After folding that one, she wrote "Krailash" on the outside. She didn't seal the notes with wax, partly because she didn't want to take the time, and partly because a blob of wax wouldn't stop her mother from reading the note addressed to Krailash if she decided to do so. Zaltys wondered if Alaia would respect her privacy or not, but in a sort of distant, theoretical way. After years of being profoundly concerned with earning her adopted mother's respect, Zaltys found that, this night, she didn't care at all. To let her believe all these years that she'd been the sole survivor of a massacre, instead of the sole escapee from a village enslaved ... She could understand why her mother had lied to her, but that didn't mean she would forgive her.

Satisfied with her arrangements, Zaltys stepped into a shadow in the corner of the wagon, emerging on the edge of camp—and stumbling to her knees as darkness crept in on the edges of her vision.

Oh. The darkness receded, and she rose unsteadily to her feet. Her new shadow armor was magical, yes, but magic had limits, and could exert a strain on those who used it, something she knew intellectually but had seldom experienced personally. It was just as well. She probably shouldn't learn to depend on the armor's capabilities—it might make her naturecraft lazy. Better to keep the shadow-shifting power as an option of last resort.

She set off into the woods, back to the purported grave site of her family, a grave which might, remarkably, lead instead to her saving their lives. If there were derro slavers in the area looking for Rainer, she could capture one, and force it to lead her to the slaves, where she could reunite with her long-lost people. A lot of girls, she knew, dreamed of discovering they were secretly princesses, and of rejoining their rightful families and being lifted out of poverty. But how many adopted princesses went in search of their original families, who were almost certainly simple jungle-dwelling villagers or refugees?

Family is family, she thought.

As she crossed the stone plaza where she'd been found as a baby, she thought she heard something, a sibilant whisper, and she spun, drawing her short blade. Something slithered across the stones—something that looked like a headless shadow snake.

Is my armor haunted by the ghost of its owner? she thought, terrified by the idea. She feared nothing she could shoot or stab, but ghosts ... She'd never heard of haunted armor, but there were stories of cursed magical items, and what was a ghost but a curse with a point of view?

The shadow snake didn't vanish, but lingered at the edge of the plaza, and after a moment's hesitation she stepped toward it. The snake began moving, and Zaltys followed.

And began to wonder if she was having a dream, *that* dream, because apart from her headless guide, it was exactly like her recurring nightmares: walking down the path, toward the pit. The

stone grate was more moss-encrusted, chipped, and weathered than it was in her dreams, but otherwise it was the same, a circle easily a dozen feet across with a trapdoor of old, rusted metal set in the center. The shadow snake slithered into one of the holes in the grate—a hole far too small for it, too small for anything bigger than a human finger, but the ghosts of shadow snakes were apparently untroubled by mere physical reality.

Did she dare open the trapdoor? She stepped onto the grate, testing it with her foot first and finding it reassuringly solid. Was it, perhaps, some other entry to the Underdark? Were the visions a message from some god or another, meant to help her save her family?

“So hungry. So thirsty.”

That voice didn’t sound inside her head, but from the depths of the pit. It was a dry, dusty, rattling voice. “Who’s there?” Zaltys said.

“Child of Zehir,” the voice said. “You have neglected your old king. I hunger, and my hungers hunger. Where are the people?”

She’d asked her mother who Zehir was, the first time the name was spoken in her dreams, and her mother had frowned. “A god of darkness and deception,” she said, “beloved of poisoners and assassins. Nothing you need to concern yourself with.” The family deity was Waukeen, goddess of merchants and trade, though Alaia also kept a shrine to Mielikki, goddess of the forest and of rangers. As a shaman, she had little use for gods in general, since her connection to the primal magic of the world was rather more direct, but as she said, a little reverence couldn’t hurt, and shows of piety reassured the workers. But they were good deities—or at least deities unopposed to goodness—while Zehir ...

“Why do you call me a child of Zehir?” she said. “I don’t worship ... that.”

“You are an instrument of the god, as am I,” the voice whispered. “You even come to me arrayed in shadow. You are death from the dark. You are poison and revenge. Set me free, and we will

conquer. Set me free, and I will raise you high. Set me free, and we —”

Zaltys fled, running away from the pit. Krailash knew a lot about the yuan-ti—she gathered some of them, far away from here, had once killed a number of his friends—and he spoke, sometimes, of the serpentfolk who’d once lived in this jungle, and the horrible god-monsters called anathemas that they kept trapped in pits even as they venerated them. The voice must belong to such a beast, or something even worse, and she couldn’t let it hypnotize her or confuse her or fill her head with lies. No doubt it whispered to anyone who came close enough, and it was surely the source of her dreams, as well. Perhaps being a native of this jungle, however long since removed, made her unusually susceptible to the creature’s powers. But she was strong; she was an heir to the Serrat family. She could not be tricked that way.

When she finally reached the false grave, shaken by her encounter with something from her dreams, she found someone waiting for her. “Julen,” she said. “You shouldn’t be here. It’s dangerous.”

Julen sighed and drove down the shovel again. “Of course it’s dangerous. Just walking through the jungle to get here was dangerous—I trod on something that tried to eat my boot. But here I am. I can’t let you go alone. I’m surprised I got here before you, though.”

Unwilling to mention the snake and the pit, she said, “I had to write a note before I left. I told you, this isn’t your problem, I’m going to save my family—”

“You’re my family,” he said. “So your family is also my family. ‘This-and-thus,’ as my father says, whenever he wants me to understand something is self-evident.”

“My mother will kill me if anything happens to you.”

“Your mother will have my father kill *me* if she finds out I let you go into a nasty hole in the ground without trying to stop you. So take me along and let me keep trying to talk you out of this.”

Zaltys crossed her arms. “No. I won’t let you go. Not even if I have to tie you up and leave you here.”

“You don’t have any choice, Cousin,” he said cheerfully, lying on his belly beside the hole, peering into the depths and probing around with the shovel. “You can’t tie me up for long. I’m trained by the Guardians—we’re tough to tie down. And even if you could, say if you knocked me unconscious first, you can’t leave me asleep *or* tied up out in the jungle. I’d be eaten by something. And if you try to leave without me, I’ll start yelling, and the scouts will hear me, and come over, and Krailash will haul you out by the scruff of your neck.”

“This is blackmail!”

“Yes.” He rose and tossed the shovel aside. “I’m blackmailing you into letting me *help* you. I’m a monster. Listen, Zaltys. What do you know about the Underdark?”

She opened her mouth, closed it, then shrugged. “I don’t know. It’s deep. It’s big. It’s dark. Wet. Dank. Slimy. Drow live down there, and other things, I guess. Derro, apparently.”

“Right. You don’t know anything. But you know my brother Malon makes all our trade arrangements with the dwarves and the drow, he’s been down underground *loads* of times, and I’ve heard all about it, not even including what I read in the books and scrolls my father’s forced on me. I know a few things you could stand to find out. What do you know about glowstone?”

“Stone. That glows.” She heard the petulance in her own voice, and hated it.

“Ha. And wormrock? It’s not rock made out of worms, I’m afraid. How about Ghaunadaur, the Elder Eye?”

“Some kind of monster god, isn’t he?” she said, vaguely remembering horror stories told by other kids. “Lives underground?”

“He’s one of the gods worshiped in the Underdark. Not that I expect us to run into *him*, or Lolth either, but it’s good to know about the presiding deities, don’t you think? How about darkrock? The Upperdark and the Lowerdark? Purple worms? Fungal altars? Doomlight crystals? Aboleths?” He shuddered. “I *hope* those are nothing but stories and legends, but if they’re not ...”

“Fine, you know more than I do. Though I don’t know how much things you learned from books or stories will help us in the dark.”

“They can hardly hurt us,” he said. “And I’ll note you’re saying ‘us,’ now, too.” He gestured to the hole. “I made a better opening to the cavern underneath. What do you say we lower a rope and get this over with?”

She stepped closer to her cousin, torn between frustration and affection. “Julen, I don’t want you to get hurt.”

“Then we’re in agreement.” He touched her cheek and grinned. “I don’t want me to get hurt, either.”



Zaltys went down the rope first, followed by Julen. They couldn’t see anything much at all, and Julen whispered, “First decision: do we make a light? It might call attention to us.”

“We won’t get far if we can’t see. And if the light does bring a derro to us, so much the better—we can force it to tell us where the slaves are kept.” She took a sunrod from her pack and struck the golden tip against the rough stone floor. Light flared at the end of the iron rod, illuminating the space around them. The sunrods were an alchemical marvel, or else magical—she wasn’t sure. The light they cast was steadier than torchlight, but sunrods were less useful than torches for setting enemies or their dwellings on fire. You couldn’t have everything.

The cavern was the size of the great hall in the family meeting house, full of rubble and dust. The shovel Julen had lost earlier was on the ground. He folded the shovel and tied it to the outside of his

pack. It was unwieldy, but Zaltys thought it was a good idea—they might need to be able to dig down here.

“There,” Julen said, pointing. A tunnel, partially obscured by fallen rocks, led off from one end of the cavern—the end that led back toward the caravan site. “I wonder if we’ll end up underneath our own campsite?” he said.

“We’ll see,” she said, and led the way, holding her sunrod aloft. They moved a few rocks aside, widening the opening, but once they stepped into the tunnel, it wasn’t as claustrophobic as Zaltys had expected. “Looks like an old mine shaft,” she said, pointing out the squared-off shape of the passage.

“Should have brought one of the dwarf craftsmen from the camp. They know about mines.”

“I don’t think there’s much to know, except: a long time ago there was a mine. This passage was used for something else more recently, though. A passageway for slavers, coming up from wherever. Is there, I don’t know, a derro city?” The notion seemed outrageous. They were in a *hole* in the ground.

“There are cities down here, supposedly, but a lot deeper than this,” Julen said doubtfully. “The Underdark isn’t mapped—some say it can’t be mapped, that tunnels are constantly collapsing and new tunnels being formed by purple worms and umber hulks and intelligent creatures excavating passages. But there are three, sort of, *regions*. The Upperdark is the part of the Underdark you can reach from the surface world, or from mineshafts and basements. And while there are monsters there, the drow and derro and other people—if you can call them people—who live down here don’t like to settle so close to the surface. They come up sometimes to escape danger, or to, ah, forage.”

“Or take slaves,” Zaltys said.

“Yes. But their settlements are in the Middledark. Below that is the Lowerdark, and the books I read didn’t say much about that, apart from the fact that it’s deep, and big, and full of terrible things. As

for derro cities, I'm sure they have settlements, but I'm not sure about cities."

"Why's that?"

"They're mad. Rainer said so, and the books agree. Can an insane race build cities? Keep a city alive? It seems impossible."

"Mad, huh? Then they won't put up an organized defense, although they must have organized a little if they do slave raids. What else do you know about them, since we'll be fighting them soon, like as not?"

"I wasn't researching them in particular," Julen admitted. "But, let's see ... Some say they're the offspring of men and dwarves. Others say they're a race of their own that became terribly degenerate and offended the gods, only to be cast down into the Underdark for their transgressions—whatever those were. Some of them worship aberrations. Things that came here from some other place. You've heard of the Far Realm?"

"Some plane or another, right?" Zaltys had never paid much attention to the tutors when they started going on about the other planes of existence. Why should she care about anything like that, when her tutors knew less about the interior of the jungle than Zaltys did herself? If they were so ignorant of *their* world, how could they know anything about worlds entirely distant?

"Ye-es." Julen sounded doubtful. "I guess so. But it's a realm of monsters beyond ordinary monsters, creatures that claw and tear at reality itself. I'm not sure what that means, but it sounds bad. Sometimes creatures from that world make it to this world, and terrible things happen. Supposedly the Underdark is more full of such creatures than most, and even though the derro are despised by all the other intelligent races down here—drow, duergar, everyone—they sometimes ally themselves with creatures from the Far Realm. Like aboleths. Such aberrations tend to live way down deep, though—or else we'd see their influence on the surface world more."

“You think we’ll have to go that deep?” Zaltys hadn’t really thought that far ahead. She’d thought, if Rainer made it back to the surface, the slaves couldn’t be *that* far away, but Julen said the old guard had wandered for years in the darkness, so who could say? “I can track anything,” she said, peering at the tunnel as they walked onward and—increasingly—downward. “But there’s just nothing to track. I don’t think anyone’s come through here in years. There’s no sign of—”

“Life,” Julen said weakly.

They’d reached the end of the tunnel, and discovered another room, that one a hub of sorts with mineshafts branching off in half-a-dozen different directions. A small wooden table sat in the center of the room, scattered with bits of bone and shards of metal beside a neatly coiled black whip. They entered cautiously, looking around. “Someone has been here, much more recently,” she said, noting a few wooden bowls crusted with old—but not ancient—food.

“The mines,” Julen said. “I don’t know who built them, if they’re a remnant of one of the old jungle empires or something built by dwarves or duergar, but the derro are using them as shortcuts to the surface. The mineshaft that opens close to the terazul fields was sealed with rubble, so they stopped using it, but these tunnels must lead to other places, all over the jungle. I bet Rainer made his way up here, and went down one of these. They could go for miles, but they must reach the air and light eventually.”

“So how do the derro get here?” She looked around the cavern, and found, under a pile of old rags, the edge of a metal trapdoor. Zaltys stared at it, thinking of the trapdoor over the anathema’s pit, until Julen noticed her.

“Guess that’s our door to the deep. Or the middle, anyway. We might be able to track the slavers this way, don’t you think? Surely a big crowd of derro crashing through leaves traces you can follow?”

“We’ll see.” Zaltys lifted open the heavy trapdoor with a shriek of hinges that echoed hugely in the enclosed space. A wooden ladder extended down into the depths.

“Me first,” Julen said cheerfully, and began descending, swallowed in moments by the dark, which seemed almost as thick and substantial as syrup. Zaltys went after him, pausing briefly, then grasped the ring on the underside of the trapdoor and closed it after her. Better to leave no trace of their passage if they could avoid it, as there might be derro about. Allowing themselves to be captured might be the fastest way to find out where the slaves were held, but it would almost certainly inhibit their ability to free the other slaves once they arrived.

The ladder went down for a long time, and the sunrod was awkward to hold while climbing, and only illuminated the walls of a narrow shaft, so Zaltys finally said, “Look out below, I’m going to drop the light.”

Julen grunted his assent, and Zaltys twisted around on the ladder and tossed the sunrod past him. They both looked down as the light moved, revealing that they were barely halfway down the ladder, and illuminating branching side tunnels dotting the shaft. They gave Zaltys a shudder. Anything could be inside them. The sunrod finally clattered to the stones below, its magical light undimmed by impact, but it didn’t reveal much: enclosed space, and, presumably, tunnels leading away. Still, it provided a glow for them to move toward, and that was something. Zaltys was already starting to think of light as a precious resource. The sunrod would burn for only another four or five hours, and she only had three more in her pack—she hadn’t imagined that she would need more than a day’s worth of light, but that had been based on the notion that it was just some small local system of caverns and tunnels. After what Julen had told her, and what she’d observed for herself so far, she suspected the Underdark was far vaster than she could comprehend.

And dangerous too. But the jungle was dangerous, and Zaltys thrived there. What terrors could the dark hold to rival the vine

horrors and monstrous spiders and immense serpents and lunatic apes she'd fought and bested in the world above?

They reached the bottom of the ladder, Julen waiting impatiently for her to come after him. He picked up the sunrod and stepped forward, Zaltys following, down a short corridor that dead-ended at a low-ceilinged, rounded corridor that seemed more burrowed than hewn and stretched off in both directions. "Which way?"

Zaltys kneeled, examining the rock in both directions, finally saying, "This way seems more traveled. Do you see the scuffmarks of—"

"That's fine, I don't need to know the dudgeoneering theory behind it," Julen said. "I have faith in you." He went down the right-hand corridor, still holding the light, and Zaltys followed. They both ducked their heads, because even though the roof of the tunnel was taller than they were, it wasn't *much* taller, and there was a sense of immense pressure and weight all around them. The weight of the whole world above.

"You know," Julen said, "this is a lot less terrible than I expected. The accounts I read talked about grell and carrion crawlers and gelatinous cubes and rust monsters inhabiting the Upperdark, but I guess the derro have scared away everything but themselves. Maybe this won't be so—"

And then he yelped and disappeared through a hole in the floor. Zaltys gasped as the light he held vanished with him, dropping to her knees and feeling her way forward with her hands until she found the edge of the pit and the shreds of black cloth that had been used to conceal it. A trap, doubtless meant for exactly the sort of interlopers they were. She peered down into the hole, which was about ten feet deep. Julen groaned, sitting up and rubbing his head, the dropped sunrod casting harsh shadows across him.

"Hold on, I'll lower a rope," she said, but while she turned her face away to dig in her pack, Julen cried out.

She looked back down the hole, and saw a small, lithe figure dressed in black kneeling on Julen's back. The creature, no bigger than a child, had wild hair sticking up in filthy tufts, and giggled to itself in an incessant, almost monotonous way. Julen arched his back, wriggled like an eel, and struck out with a knife, filling one of the monster's eyes with a steel blade. He wrenched the knife free and started to stand up, but then something buzzed through the air. Zaltys could see a short dart sticking out of Julen's neck, and he put his hand to the wound before swaying and falling back against the rocks. Some kind of poison, or if he was lucky, just a tranquilizer to knock him unconscious.

Zaltys almost leaped down, but three more of the creatures surged into the hole and began binding Julen's limbs with metal chains. If they hit her with a dart too, they'd both be doomed—better to wait for an opportunity to free him. She started to move back, and her boot scraped on the stone. The creatures at the bottom of the pit froze and whipped their heads back, staring straight up.

The things were nightmares, like parodies of humans: skin a blue-tinged gray, eyes far too large for the small faces and lacking either pupil or iris, giving them a look of blindness—but Zaltys knew they could see all too well, and must almost certainly be able to see in the dark. She had to hope the brightness of the sunrod at the bottom of the pit diminished their vision, or else they would surely see her.

But she could hide in shadows now. She let herself fade into the dimness, using the shadow snake's power of concealment, and after a moment the derro giggled again and turned their attention back to Julen. One of them grasped the chains binding Julen's wrists and dragged his unconscious body out of sight. Zaltys would wait a few moments, then drop down and follow them from concealment, choosing the moment to step through a shadow and attack them.

The tunnel floor shuddered, and the pit filled with rubble, smothering the light from the abandoned sunrod and blocking her access. Rocks had obviously been stacked and braced, and when the derro left, they'd removed the braces, collapsing the pit. They might

be insane giggling monsters, but they were smart enough to cover their tracks in case Julen *did* have companions. She cursed, and thought furiously. Saving Julen was the first priority, obviously. But if she could track him and his captors, the derro might lead her to the place where slaves were kept. Still, what if she were captured herself? She wouldn't be able to bear it if Julen died or suffered—worse than he'd already suffered—because of her. For his sake, she would be willing to ask Krailash for help, but if she returned the surface, she might lose track of him forever.

The ring. She looked down at her hand, and the gently pulsing crystalline ring there. She thought, as hard as she could, to Krailash: *Julen has been captured by derro in the tunnels beneath my family's false grave.* The ring's light pulsed brighter, and then went dim. That was the last message she'd be able to send for a day or so. She'd have to hope it was received, and that Krailash could send help.

She couldn't quite bring herself to hope that she wouldn't *need* help. Not realistically.

Zaltys probed her way on hands and knees along the dark tunnel until her hand encountered another cloth-covered pit trap. Using her hunting knife, she slit the cloth open. Once she'd made a hole, she took a climbing spike from her pack and worked it into a crack in the floor. She tied a rope around the spike, dropped it into the hole, then lowered herself carefully into the pit. Even fully extended, her fingertips clinging to the edge of the pit, she couldn't feel the bottom—which made sense. The other had been easily ten feet deep. She grasped the rope and lowered herself, inch by inch, into the total darkness below (not so different from the total darkness above), hoping there would be no spikes or other hazards waiting for her. She planted her feet on solid ground and listened. There was giggling, faintly, off to her left. With a jerk on the rope she freed the climbing spike and bundled both into her pack, then felt her way along the tunnel that led out of the pit, following the sound of insane laughter.

She could already understand how madness could be a consequence of spending time down there.

CHAPTER TEN

WHEN ZALTYS'S VOICE, RAW WITH PANIC, BURST INTO his brain, Krailash stumbled in the sword form he was practicing, dropped his training weapon, and raced for Alaia's wagon. Glory stepped out of her front door in front of him, and as usual upon seeing her, Krailash remembered her existence. "You heard it too?" he said.

"I did." She rubbed the spot between her horns. "If she saw Julen taken, that means she's—"

"Yes." He rushed for his leader's wagon, pounding on the door. "You must let us in, Alaia! This is urgent!"

"Enter," came a soft, sad voice from beyond the door.

Krailash pushed his way in and saw Alaia, the tough, unflappable head of the Travelers, sitting on her divan with a look of utter despair on her face, tears rolling down her cheeks, holding a letter in her hands. Before Krailash could speak, she said, in a dull monotone, "Zaltys found out. I don't know how. Perhaps she talked to Rainer, before he left camp? But she found out her people weren't killed. That they were taken as slaves. Her letter ... It says she can never forgive me for the lies I've told. How can I make her understand, I only wanted to protect her, to keep her from grief."

"Did the letter say where she's gone?" Krailash asked urgently.

Alaia nodded. "She's going on a long circle patrol, to look for more terazul, she says. We shouldn't expect her back for a few days. Should I send someone to find her? My spirit boar? Or should I just send a message? Or—"

“My friend,” Krailash said gently. “Zaltys, she did not tell you the truth. She went with young Julen to the ruined temple. They found access to the tunnels below. I think she must have some idea of freeing her people, but Julen ...”

“She sent her thoughts, using the ring I gave her,” Glory said, shouldering her way into the wagon. “Julen has been taken by derro. Zaltys called out for help. But I doubt she has the sense to come back to the surface and *wait* for that help.”

Alaia stood up, the look of loss and sadness on her face suddenly gone. A boar of mist coalesced around her feet and streaked out of the wagon, presumably into the jungle. “Get Quelamia!” she shouted. “Glory, fetch her now, call her with your mind.”

“I am here,” Quelamia said, climbing the steps with her usual stately grace. “How may I serve?”

“You and Glory will go with me into the tunnels—” she began, but Krailash put his hand on her shoulder.

“You cannot go,” he said. “There is you, and your heir Zaltys, and as your head of security, I can’t let both of you go into the dark. You *are* the Travelers. Without you, the enterprise will founder. The family—”

“To hell with the family! She *is* my family. I’m going, Krailash, and nothing you say can stop me.” She turned to the wizard and the psion. “You two will accompany me.”

“I regret that I cannot venture into the Underdark.” Quelamia bowed low, and her voice held real contrition, but it held steel too. Krailash gaped at her.

“What is the meaning of this treachery?” There was even more steel in Alaia’s voice.

“No treachery. I would do no good there. If I went into those tunnels, we would soon be faced by dangers far greater than a clan of mad derro. As you know, I hail from the Feywild, but you may not realize that the Underdark has a counterpart in the Feywild too.

We call it the Feydark, and it is home to many creatures, chief among them the fomorians, monstrous giants who ... Well, they have sworn to kill me, for reasons that have no bearing on this situation. But if I venture into the darkness, given my natural affinity for the Feywild, they will sense my closeness, and open a portal from their realm to this one, and attempt to kill me. I would be fully engaged in fighting them and preserving my own life, and thus, of no use to your search for Zaltys.”

“Similar problem,” Glory said, raising one hand. “I’m the strongest psion for miles, and there are things in the Underdark—mind flayers mainly, but there are others—who are attracted to psionic energy, and want nothing more than to eat a brain like mine. If I go into the Underdark, I’d bring a whole new world of problems down on us.”

“So you’re saying you’re too powerful to help,” Alaia said bitterly.

Quelamia and Glory exchanged a look. The tiefling shrugged, and the eladrin nodded.

“I’ll go, of course,” Krailash said, a trifle wearily. “The wizard and the devil kin can make sure the caravan doesn’t fall apart in our absence. We couldn’t all go, anyway. Someone has to keep order here.”

“Fine,” Alaia said. “Gather your men. We leave immediately.” She stormed out of the wagon.

“Such are the consequences of lies,” Quelamia said.

“We had to tell Zaltys her parents were dead,” Krailash said. “You can’t raise a child to believe that family is the single most important thing in the world, and then tell her that some of her family is still alive in servitude to monsters beneath the earth. We didn’t tell her because we were afraid this *very thing* would happen.”

“Oh, right,” Glory said. “I forgot that was all you knew.”

He frowned. “What are you saying?”

“Glory,” Quelamia said warningly.

“Don’t worry about it, I’ll just wipe his mind in a few minutes,” Glory said. “The real reason we lied to Zaltys is because we didn’t want her to find out what she really is. You still think she’s a little human girl, but once we got her back to the city and examined her when she was a newborn, we figured it out pretty quick. I had to erase some memories that day, I’ll tell you. Those scales she had on her back as a baby, remember? She had those because she’s a yuan-ti.”

“A snakeman? That’s nonsense. And you will not erase any of my—”

“They call them purebloods,” Glory said, sitting down. “Yuan-ti who look almost human, throwbacks to the nonserpent stock in their heritage. Or creatures chosen by the dark gods to infiltrate the lesser races, depending on what you believe. The yuan-ti use them as spies and traitors, send them to live secretly among humans, spreading the cult of their gods, or just sowing discord and making trouble. Anyway, that’s what Zaltys is. The fact that we cut out her scales with an enchanted knife doesn’t change her nature. We didn’t want her to find out she’s the scion of a cult of evil snake people. If she did ...”

“What?” Quelamia said. “You think if she found out her parents were, as you say, ‘evil snake people,’ it would make her pursue a similar path?”

Glory shrugged. “Some say evil’s in the blood. Believe me, I’ve heard it said a lot—I’ve got devil in my bloodline. I don’t think I’m evil, but then, a cultist of Zehir probably doesn’t think they’re evil, either, just devout. I know you and Alaia believe that how you’re brought up is what matters—that if she could be raised without the influence of Zehir she would be indistinguishable from a human. Maybe you’re right—she doesn’t wear her evil heritage on her face, and I’m sure that helps.” Glory touched her horns. “But what if Zehir is interested in *her*? I know, hardly likely. So leave all that aside. Even if Zaltys has no natural tendency toward dark behavior, finding out you’re not even the same *species* as your adopted family, that’s got to mess with your head. It’s a secret we wanted to keep

from Zaltys until she was older. Funny thing is, Alaia was going to tell her soon, even though I said I thought it would be a bad idea. Alaia figured as an adult now, Zaltys deserved to know about her heritage. Of course, we'd still have to keep it a secret from everybody else."

"Yuan-ti are scum," Krailash said, nearly trembling with rage. To keep this from him! Didn't they understand the implications? "If Zaltys is truly what you say, how can we know she wasn't planted by cultists of Zehir for us to find? That she isn't a spy like these other purebloods? Perhaps unknown even to herself, with commands planted deep in her mind, waiting to be activated when she's head of the Travelers? What if this is part of some deep plan to rebuild their fallen empire? I must tell Alaia."

"She *knows*," Glory said wearily. "Alaia, Quelamia, and me—we're the ones who know. There's a reason we don't let you remember, because you always get so paranoid. Zaltys's people were stolen by slavers when she was an infant. There's no big plot. The yuan-ti settlement here was a tattered remnant. They weren't capable of a plan this baroque and drawn-out—I can't believe *anybody* is. Zaltys was raised human, and more importantly, she was raised to be a *Serrat*, and that's what counts." Glory waved her hand.

Krailash's sense of outrage and betrayal suddenly became a sense of confusion and bewilderment, and after a moment, he shook his head. Why was he standing here? There was work to be done, and the heir to his mistress was in danger. "I have to gather my men to go after Zaltys and Julen. Take care of the camp while we're gone, please. We'll return as soon as we're able." He left the wagon before they answered him, troubled by the sense that he was forgetting something important, but soon he was shouting at his men, and the necessity of the moment covered over his misgivings.



"Are you sure I can't convince you to stay?" Krailash asked, as Alaia cursed and tripped over another tree root. "I know it's been some time since you ventured into the wilderness."

“I grew up in this jungle,” she snapped. “My mother initiated me into the shamanic arts under these very trees. I belong here.” A branch wrapped with thorn vines brushed her arm and made her hiss.

Krailash considered saying more, but didn’t. The truth was, in her youth, Alaia had been profoundly connected to the jungle, and had flourished as a shaman. But the needs of the family had forced her to spend more and more time in the city, and when she took over the Travelers when her mother passed, she’d given in to the inevitable fate of spending half the year in the city. Krailash could remember when she’d had two spirit companions at her feet, matched boars, but in the past twenty years she’d only had one. A shaman was meant to be a protector of the wild places, and while Alaia did steadfastly defend the area where terazul flowers grew, she did so for largely civilized reasons, and that tension had seemingly diminished her shamanic powers, if only because it sowed disorder and conflict in her own mind. A priest who strayed from their chosen deity as much as Alaia had strayed from her path might find himself on the wrong end of a god’s rage, but shamans took their power from the primal force of the natural world, which, lacking consciousness, was not prone to fits of pique or thoughts of vengeance. Alaia was still powerful, but she’d seldom had cause to call on that power, and Krailash wondered if she was still as capable as she assumed.

Sensing the blackness of her mood, he tried to change the subject. “I was surprised when Zaltys chose the path of a ranger, rather than the path of the shaman.” Surprised you *let* her choose it, was the unspoken remainder of that sentence.

“Ha,” Alaia said. “It’s just as well. With my luck she would have become a disciple of the World Serpent.”

Krailash frowned. “What’s wrong with that path? World Serpent shamans are formidable.”

“Hm. Never mind. Suffice to say I don’t like snakes, even astral snakes that hold the world in their protective coils. Being a ranger suits her better, and I daresay it’s a more practical specialty for the head of the Travelers.” She paused by a tree to catch her breath, and the dozen guards in a moving ring around her paused as well. “How much farther to this accursed temple?”

She’d never been there, Krailash realized. She’d never seen the chasm that led to the Underdark, or the rubble that covered it. She didn’t want to remember the origins of her daughter, he supposed, and who could blame her? “Not much farther,” he said. How much farther they would have to go once they made it *under* the temple, he could not guess, and did not care to speculate.

“My spirit companion is down there in the dark already, though it’s nearly reached the limit of its range—I swear there was a time when it could travel farther away from me than this. It’s found no sign of Zaltys, though it has discovered some sign of the derro slavers.” She stopped abruptly, and swore, reaching into the sleeve of her robe. “This is yours. Zaltys left it for you, and in the confusion I forgot about it.” She passed over a letter, not sealed, just folded, with his name written in Zaltys’s surprisingly elegant script. “I didn’t read it,” Alaia said, as if she’d been accused.

“I know.” Though he also knew she would hover by him and demand to know what it said. Squinting in the dim torchlight from the surrounding guards—a beacon to any animals in the jungle, but also a warning—he scanned the half page of words. “She says she doesn’t blame me,” he said. “That she knows I was only following orders, and that, ah ...”

“That I’m the only liar of note?” Alaia said.

Krailash nodded. “More or less.” He shook his head. “We just wanted to give her a sense of closure, however tragic, so the thought of her lost parents wouldn’t eat at her. But even the best-intentioned lies can have unintended consequences.”

“Mmm. I see there are quite a few more *words* there,” Alaia prompted.

“The rest is just an apology for not coming to see me to organize the scout schedule, with some suggestions for how it might best be done,” he said. Krailash folded the letter in half, then in half again, and pushed it down into a pouch at his belt. “We should move on. Going is slow in the Underdark, I’ve heard, and we may catch up to them soon if we hurry.”

Alaia grunted assent, and they continued walking through the jungle. Zaltys and Julen had left barely a trace of their passage, but a crowd of soldiers made a more obvious path, and went more slowly too, breaking through obstacles Zaltys and Julen would have leaped over or slipped beneath. “I don’t understand why she took Julen with her,” Alaia said. “That doesn’t seem like her. My daughter has always been of the opinion that she can do *anything* by herself.”

“Seems rather more likely it was Julen’s idea, don’t you think?” Krailash glanced at his mistress. He was surprised to see she had no idea what he was talking about. “He’s madly in love with Zaltys, you know,” he said. “You can see it written on his face like lines of ancient imperial poetry every time he looks at her.”

“Love? Nonsense, he’s her baby cousin,” Alaia sighed. “When did I get so *old*, Krailash? I know I never married, but there was a time when I at least dabbled in thoughts of love, when I had the free time. And the boy is nearly sixteen now, isn’t he? I’m sure he’s been falling in love with housemaids and shopgirls and his tutors for years by now. Naturally Zaltys would catch his eye.”

“And her being an adoptee means they’re not necessarily idle thoughts,” Krailash said.

Alaia groaned. “I can’t think of political marriages—or the possibility of a brat from the Guardians trying to put his hands on my *daughter*—just now. You don’t think ... does Zaltys reciprocate his feelings?”

“I’ve seen no evidence of anything more than familial affection on her part,” Krailash assured her.

“That’s something,” Alaia said.

“Here’s the plaza.” Krailash pointed. “Where we found Zaltys as a baby.”

“Let’s hurry along to the place where we’ll find her as a teenaged girl, then, hmm?”

Krailash took her to the false grave, noting the two holes, one of which opened down into darkness. He set his men to widening the opening—it was far too small for a dragonborn, or even the larger human guards—while Alaia paced impatiently around the wreckage of the temple. After a few moments when the only sound was picks and axes striking the ground, Alaia tapped Krailash on the shoulder. “I’m an idiot,” she said. “Look at me. I’m wearing *robes*. To go crawling around in caves and tunnels.”

He nodded, having wondered when she was going to notice that, and opened his pack. “Quelamia caught me just as I was leaving camp and handed me this. She said you might need it.” He passed over a bundle of bluish-black cloth embroidered with tiny white stars.

Alaia shook it out and held it up, frowning. The exotic cloth aside, it was a simple enough gown, if elegantly cut. “Rather fancy dress for grubbing about in holes in the ground.”

“Quelamia says it’s as good as leather armor at a tenth the weight.” He shrugged. “Wizard things, I imagine.”

Alaia squinted. “I think this is a robe of stars. Quelamia mentioned owning one once.”

“Sounds quite mystical,” Krailash said politely.

“I gather it can be used to bring light to dark situations. I won’t test that now, but if it can turn a sword blade, I’m well pleased. I’m going around this wall to change.”

“Not without an escort. I’ve lost one of the family to derro already, and won’t lose another. Rainer just went around the corner once, and he was stolen in moments.”

“Fine, then, come along, but don’t ogle.”

“You aren’t even my species,” he grumbled. “It would be like ogling a monkey. No offense.” He followed her around a fragment of freestanding wall, and averted his eyes while she changed.

“Well?” she said, and Krailash looked her over. She was rather regal in the garment, and the stars seemed almost to twinkle.

“You look like a magic user, all right,” he said.

“Oh good. Stab me?”

Krailash sighed, took a dagger from his belt, and pressed the point very gently against the sleeve of the gown. “Feel anything?”

“Pressure. No pinprick. Give me a slash.”

Krailash swung the knife, at an angle shallow enough that it wouldn’t cause much damage beyond shaving off a bit of skin if it got through. But the blade bounced off as if he’d struck boiled leather. “Won’t do you much good if a boulder falls on you, but it will afford some protection. Do you think you can crawl around on hands and knees in it if need be?”

“Without even scraping my knees,” she said. “Nice thing about magical robes—they tend to adjust to fit. All right, now that I’ve held everyone up, let’s get moving.”

When they came back to the false gravesite, the hole was big enough for the whole party to descend. Krailash sent three men ahead, then himself, then Alaia, and the last three men in the back. They were all well-provisioned and well-armed. Krailash began to regret bringing his great battle-axe Thunder’s Edge when they entered the old mining tunnel, because it would be impossible to swing with any power in such confined space, especially with his allies pressed in so close.

“Wait,” Alaia said, and the company halted. “My spirit companion is just up ahead, in a sort of nexus room connecting many of these tunnels, and it senses movement.” Her eyes widened. “Derro! They’re coming in from all sides, they’re going to—”

The guard at the front of the tunnel screamed as dozens of crossbow bolts struck him simultaneously, his death cry a counterpoint to the demented giggling of the onrushing derro attackers.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

JULEN WOKE UP WITH ENTIRELY TOO MUCH UNDERSTANDING. There was no blissful moment of confusion, no disorientation, no instant when he thought he might be having a terrible nightmare. His years of training at the hands of the Guardians had made such self-delusions impossible, and when consciousness returned to him, he knew exactly what was happening.

He'd fallen into a pit, and been drugged and captured by derro slavers, and his future would either be very short and very unpleasant, or very long and indescribably *more* unpleasant. The heavy metal shackles binding his ankles were attached to similar cuffs around his wrists, the two sets of restraints joined by short chains, forcing his knees into a drawn-up position. He lay on his left side, curled body scraping painfully against the rough tunnel floor as his captors dragged him by a long chain attached to the shackles. There was precious little to see, as the tunnel was dark, and the derro apparently had no need for light. They weren't giggling, but they were talking to themselves, in guttural tones that must have been Deep Speech, along with occasional fragments of Common, words that made no sense out of context and probably didn't make much sense anyway: "melon," "candlelight," "fencepost," "dung," "matrimony."

The histories he'd read all said derro were mad, but that only made them more dangerous. His father had taken him to an asylum once, to see a man who'd killed fourteen respectable women in Delzimmer before being captured. That man had chatted amiably with voices only he could hear, and claimed to take his murderous instructions from a neighbor's pet wolfhound—the wolfhound had

been examined, and was determined to be an ordinary dog, not a lycanthrope or demon in disguise or anything else unusual, and certainly nothing capable of controlling a man's mind. The killer had, unquestionably, been insane, but he'd eluded the authorities for months, carefully laying false trails that pointed blame toward his imaginary enemies, and his booby-trapped basement lair had taken the lives of a dozen city guards before he was apprehended. His father had told him all that, and said, "You see, Julen, madness doesn't mean stupidity. The mad can be clever and cunning—sometimes even wise—and because their motivations are often impossible for sane men to comprehend, they are almost impossible to predict and troublesome to manipulate. Some like to employ the mad as assassins or enforcers or ultimate threats, but I advise against it. If such measures seem necessary, invest in a skilled actor who can pretend to madness. Actors are easily manipulated, especially by the lever of vanity, and often have the sort of moral flexibility that proves useful in our operatives."

The derro weren't actors. They were twisted beings, despised even by the other races in the Underdark, tainted by their dark researches and assignments with aberrations, and they couldn't be bribed, or begged, or outsmarted, or reasoned with, which limited his diplomatic options. Trying to kill the mad was also troublesome, as they often fought on happily when sane people would have given in to the inevitability of death. The situation wasn't hopeless—the Guardians held that almost no situation was—but it was certainly dire. Escaping from the derro was the main priority.

Julen examined the shackles as best he could by feel, probing for the lock with his fingertips, because he'd been lockpicking since he was old enough to hold a burglar's tools. But there was no lock, and as he shifted, the metal grew warm and contracted, squeezing his hands and ankles more tightly. Magic, then. That was problematic. He wondered if the green knife in his pack could help, but one of the derro must have taken it. The dagger at his belt was also gone, but the throwing knives were still hidden in his sleeves. No help now, in this bump-and-drag situation, but of potential use later.

There was something else up his sleeve: the piece of pale blue chalk he'd found in his pack. He'd secreted it there with some idea of marking their descent through this labyrinth so they could find their way up again.

"It's not a labyrinth," the derro dragging him said in an unsteady, high-pitched voice, like a drunken child's. "Common mistake. Unlike a maze, a labyrinth has only a single path. It's a circuitous path, takes a long time to traverse, and there are lots of twists and turns, but there are no branch paths, no moments of choice, no dead ends—you can't get lost in a labyrinth, you can just get *bored*. A labyrinth is a means of meditation, or a way to make a minotaur's mealtime more entertaining for the watchers. But this, this is no labyrinth. There are paths here with a thousand branches, that all end in death. It's more like a maze, though not one of your silly garden mazes with hedges. This is a maze that spreads out front and back and to and fro and up and down, all bridges and pits and overs and unders. You can't map it because there are things here that eat maps and maps that eat mapmakers and things that eat appetites." The voice lapsed into silence.

After a long moment, Julen said, "You can read minds?" That seemed the only answer, unless Julen had been muttering about labyrinths aloud, and he was fairly sure he hadn't fallen *that* far from the heights of his Guardian training.

"What? No one can read minds. There are no minds to read except mine, because mine is the only real mind, and none of you things that pretend to have minds can possibly read a mind like mine." There was a sound of a scuffle, and the derro who'd spoken squawked in pain. The relentlessly scraping forward motion stopped, and the chains holding Julen went slack. He considered trying to escape, but he would have had to crab-scuttle along the tunnel, and he wouldn't have made it far, even if the derro were apparently fighting among themselves.

The chains tightened again, and Julen's movement resumed, and he bumped against a leather-clad body curled on the ground, catching

the rank whiff of spilling entrails and fresh blood.

“I see death. It’s a labyrinth of light and dark,” the fallen derro whispered as Julen was dragged past him, and then exhaled its final breath.

Madness, Julen thought. The remaining two derro ahead of him began to sing in a croaky but harmonious way in what he thought was a Dwarvish dialect. But no one tried to take his chalk, so he shook his sleeve until the slim cylinder fell into his hand, and left intermittent marks on the ground as he was dragged. The chalk glowed, faintly luminous, which suggested it was magical, which further suggested it wouldn’t be easily wiped off. He hoped. Leaving Zaltys a trail to follow was probably his best hope of survival, at least until some other opportunity presented itself. Assuming she hadn’t been captured too. What if *she* was counting on *him* to save *her*?

It seemed an unlikely prospect, given her capabilities, but the idea that Zaltys might need him strengthened his resolve to escape, even more than the prospect of being tortured by these chattering, cackling, singing lunatics.



Zaltys was justly proud of her tracking skills, but they weren’t doing her much good at the moment. She had excellent night vision, but that required some stray beam of light somewhere for the eye to capture and amplify. Underground, she was beyond the reach of starlight. There were sunrods left in her pack, but she didn’t want to give away her position. The derro had stopped giggling, but they must still have been relatively close by, assuming she hadn’t crept right past a branching tunnel. There was a terrible stink there, too, as if she were crawling through a sewer, though there was no particular dampness.

Her foot, sliding along the stone before her to feel the way, hit something heavy but yielding, and metal clinked against leather.

There in the dark, she closed her eyes. If it was a dead body ... if it was *Julen's* body ... Was the salvation of family members she'd never met worth the death of a cousin she knew and liked and even, now that she thought about it, loved?

Crouching, she ran her hands along the body, feeling for the face. Coarse hair, stiff and clotted with filth, touched her fingers. The hair was far too long to be *Julen's*; he kept his clipped unfashionably short because, he said, long hair was a liability in a fight. *Zaltys*, who was a bit vain about her own long dark hair, agreed in theory, but settled for pinning and tying hers up most of the time.

Relief washed through her. This was some dead *derro* then, probably, but killed by whom? *Julen* himself? It was possible. She searched the body as best she could by feel, going cautiously in case there were hidden barbs or bare poisoned blades. Hanging from the dead man's rather bloody belt she found the wicked shape of a repeating hand crossbow, loaded with a full case of five bolts, and extra ammunition besides. She had some of the classical archer's contempt for crossbows, considering them too easy to use and dismissing their lighter bolts as incapable of the penetrative power of an arrow loosed from a conventional bow, but a crossbow that small would be easier to use at close range, so she let practicality overcome distaste and hung it from her own belt.

She continued her search, trying to think of it as an act akin to skinning an animal instead of looting a corpse, hoping to find a candle-end or a full canteen. She was surprised to find a heavy pack instead. Opening the strap, she felt around inside—there was a sheathed knife, neatly coiled rope, what felt like a small glass bottle, clothes, tasteless field rations, a full adventurer's pack, just like the one *Julen* had been carrying. Why would he kill one of his captors but leave his pack behind? Perhaps she was misreading the situation. There were surely numerous other ways to die down here. If only she had some clue, some mark of passage.

Ahead of her, so faint she thought at first it was some hallucination brought on by her eyes straining for light in a lightless place, she detected a streak of pale blue on the floor. She approached it, going on hands and knees, putting her face inches from the floor, and it was unmistakable: a luminous chalk mark an inch or so long. A message from Julen? It seemed like the sort of thing a Guardian-trained spy might use, to leave messages and subtly mark a passage.

She kept moving, and soon found more chalk marks. Not bright enough to illuminate her surroundings, but unmistakable to her light-hungry eyes. Zaltys moved more quickly once she had a trail to follow and was surprised when the tunnel gradually grew lighter. Patches of bluish-green fungus spotted the cavern walls, fed by rivulets of water that oozed down, pooling in depressions on the floor. The light, though dim, was miraculous after so long in the limitless black, and Zaltys studied her surroundings. The tunnel was rounded and curving, rather like being inside the body of an enormous worm—a hideous thought. Multiple splashes of water on the stone indicated the passage of other creatures who'd tromped heedlessly through the puddles recently. Zaltys realized she might soon be faced with the choice of striking down Julen's captors, or following them at a distance to see where they went. It would be nice to have his help, if only to make him carry his own pack, as the weight of all the supplies was slowing her down. It would also be nice not to be alone down there.

But she wasn't alone. A snake, as white and unmarked as a derro's eyes and easily as long as she was tall, slithered through one of the puddles and lifted its pale head toward her, tongue flickering. "How long have you been following me?" she whispered, because she was certain, somehow, that it was no mere passerby out hunting cave rodents. The snake looked away from her, moved smoothly a short distance down the tunnel, then paused, as if waiting for her.

"You could at least offer to carry something for me," Zaltys muttered, and set off again. The tunnel gradually opened up, the walls moving away and the ceiling rising, and though there were

still patches of luminescence, they were farther away, and dimmer as a result. At least she no longer felt as if she were crawling through a gopher burrow—there was a ceiling up there somewhere, but it no longer brushed the top of her head if she didn't crouch.

The snake was almost invisible again, just a faint pale ribbon, but it seemed to be following the chalk marks just as much as she did—until it abruptly stopped, coiled up on itself, and flopped on its back.

Some snakes played dead when threatened, but there was no threat that Zaltys could sense—nothing on either side of her, nothing behind, nothing in front.

Guardian apes. Not that she literally thought there were apes down there, but she'd told Julen, in the jungle, that temple guardian apes would drop on you from the trees above, that in the wild you had to be aware of the world above as well as the world on all sides, and why would that be any different there?

She lifted the hand crossbow and swept it up over her head in an arc, rapidly working the reloading lever and firing off all five bolts in seconds. Something above her screamed—the sound was like tortured metal, not like any animal she'd ever heard before—and Zaltys dropped Julen's pack and rolled away. Discretion be damned: she needed to see what she was dealing with. She grabbed a sunrod and struck its end against the uneven stone floor, squinting against the sudden explosion of brightness.

There were jellyfish in the water off the coast of Delzimmer, enough that the harbormaster sometimes organized culls to keep them from clogging up the waterways. She'd seen squid too, though usually on a dinner table or hanging up at a fish market.

The things that filled the air of the caverns above her were a bit like jellyfish, and a bit like squid. They floated in the blackness, their bodies wrinkled hemispheres like human brains, each dangling eight or ten long, wicked-looking tentacles. The one she'd injured lay sprawled on the ground, tentacles flailing, hideous beak opening

and closing as it mewled. The beast had no eyes that she could see, which might explain why the others seemed untroubled by her light, but they were descending toward her like deadly spores floating down on a breeze.

Julen would know what these are called, she thought. One of his books would have told him about them. Perhaps they're intelligent—maybe they have an arrangement with the derro, to let them pass unharmed, and hinder others.

She didn't know what the things were called, but she supposed she didn't need to know the name of their race to diminish its numbers. As the tentacles of the descending enemy reached toward her, and their injured fellow mewled and lashed, Zaltys prepared for her first battle in the dark.

CHAPTER TWELVE

IF THE EYELESS CREATURES DESCENDING ALL AROUND couldn't see Zaltys, then her ability to fade into shadow probably wouldn't help much. She reloaded the hand crossbow and set it aside, but within reach. The creatures didn't seem to be in any hurry, so she opened her bow case and removed her new weapon, stringing it quickly. A dozen creatures. She could manage a dozen aimed shots per minute, maybe as many as fifteen on an exceptionally good day, and range wasn't a problem—unfortunately—as they were getting closer all the time. Shooting *up* was always awkward, but Krailash had made her practice shooting birds on the wing often enough. She took a mental snapshot of the descending creatures, dropped the sunrod on the ground, and nocked her first arrow.

The bow was a pleasure to use. She'd practiced with it, but that was nothing compared to using it in battle. It was a shorter bow than the one she usually carried, a compact bow, ingeniously recurved to provide the kind of power that longer bows achieved through the simple brute force of better leverage. The bowstring was beautifully made from the sinew of, no doubt, some legendary animal. She took an arrow—a shame to use an *ordinary* arrow in such a bow, an arrow kept by the barrel in the family armory, but she knew she should save her more exotic projectiles—from her quiver and nocked it, raising the bow as she pulled back the string. She pushed the bow forward with her left arm as she pulled back the bowstring with her right, straining until her shoulder-blades felt like they might meet; the draw on the bow was heavier than she was accustomed to, but not impossibly so. At full extension, her right index finger just touched the corner of her lips. She looked along the length of the arrow at her first target: the nearest hideous

descending creature. Kill the ones nearest first, as she would have more time to kill the ones that were farther away.

Don't look at the head of the arrow, don't think of the bow at all, just look at the target. The bow is an extension of the will; the arrow is the instrument of that will.

Loosing an arrow is as simple as letting go. Release the string. The weapon does all the work.

Then do it all over again.

The beasts fell like fat raindrops as the arrows pierced them, and she stepped carefully as she loosed to stay out of the range of their lashing tentacles as they fell—the appendages were barbed, and probably venomous. There were only three left, but they scattered, coming at her from different directions, moving faster, and she realized she'd never be able to hit them all.

But she was still thinking like a woman who possessed no magic. The sunrod made ample shadows, so she stepped into one, and stepped out of another across the cavern, with all three of the creatures in her sights. Three more rapid pulls and releases put them down. She hadn't needed her hand crossbow after all. She surveyed the room, but there was nothing there still alive, apart from the albino cave snake, which slithered among the fallen bodies, investigating them with interest, heedless of their tentacles but somehow avoiding them too. Zaltys wanted to recover her arrows—her quiver only held eighteen, and she'd used up a dozen. Of the six left, three had enchanted arrowheads given to her by Quelamia—salamander tooth, basilisk slime, crystalline shard of the Living Gate—and the remaining three ordinary arrows were the worst of the bunch. All serviceable, but not as straight and true as the ones she'd used already. Getting the arrows was probably impossible, though. The beasts were mostly still lashing their tentacles, either in their death throes or merely injured. She'd aimed for the central undersides of their bodies, thinking that might be a weak spot, but only three or four seemed outright dead, so perhaps

she'd misjudged. She recovered her pack, the sunrod, and her hand crossbow, but could only get three of her arrows back without coming close to the thrashing creatures, several of whom were croaking in a guttural way that might have been speech. They probably were intelligent, then—but they'd looked like death from above to her, and she'd acted accordingly.

Zaltys couldn't finish them with a blade, not without coming in reach of their tentacles. She considered waiting for them to die to get the rest of her arrows, but what if their voices brought more creatures to help them—or predators to feed on them, which might like Zaltys as an appetizer? Every moment that passed took Julen farther away from her too. She'd always disdained the idea of magical “endless quivers,” finding it somehow vaguely unsporting to kill a creature with a magical arrow that would disappear in an hour anyway, but she wished she had one now. After all, shadow snake armor and a magical bow were hardly sporting, either. And, more importantly, this mission was nothing like sport.

The snake was certainly ready to go, slithering toward one of the two tunnels that led away from the cavern, one slanting up, one angled precipitously down. Zaltys looked, and—no surprise—saw a blue chalk mark just inside the down-slanting tunnel. The snake slithered off into the depths, and Zaltys followed.



From the roof of the cavern, otherwise inhabited only by the dying, a grell philosopher descended toward its fallen followers, watching their lovely, supple tentacles gradually go still. Grell tended to be solitary hunters, but occasionally one with an unusually strong will could bind others into its service—or woo them with a sufficiently potent philosophy. A philosopher without followers is essentially someone talking to himself, and the grell was, if not sorrowful about the massacre, at least annoyed. It could have intervened, of course, with psychic blasts, stunning the human girl long enough for her to be paralyzed by the toxic tentacles of its minions. She could

have been eaten at leisure, or made into a slave if she'd proved receptive to the philosopher's teachings.

I've held up my end of the arrangement, the philosopher thought at the darkness. It could sense, in its mind, the presence of that much greater mind—itsself only a fragment of some larger and more potent whole—that had paused here to bargain. *I spared your instrument, and let my people die. I don't see why we couldn't have let her simply pass by unmolested. Why provoke her?*

She needs to grow accustomed to killing here, in the dark, the great mind replied. *There is much more killing ahead of her.*

And you'll make sure the ones killed are my enemies? the philosopher asked. *The derro who forced me to give them safe passage through my territory?*

Those. Among others. So I have sworn. The dark voice withdrew.

What do you swear by, the philosopher mused, when you are yourself possessed of a name that *others* swear by? Who could punish a god for breaking an oath? They were deep questions, worthy of intensive pondering, and the philosopher let his mind consider them from every possible angle as he went about the grim pleasure of eating the corpses of his former students.



The derro didn't fight with any particular strategy; they barely even had tactics. The first wave gibbered and swung crude clubs, shrieking wildly, a technique that many warriors used to frighten their enemies—but Krailash thought their shrieks were the real thing, actual madness instead of imitation ferocity. The derro in the second rank sprayed bolts from their repeating crossbows almost at random, and struck down more of their own attacking thugs than they did the human guards crowding the tunnel. What they lacked in battle proficiency they made up for with pure ferocity, and an enemy that behaves irrationally is hard for an experienced warrior to deal with.

But the guards were armored well, and they were hardened veterans, so they raised their shields and hacked off any derro limb that tried to break their line. The narrow mineshaft was actually a good defensive position, but the onslaught of the derro, who fought on, heedless of injury, until their wounds were too severe to ignore, was too much. Krailash called the rearguard forward and sent them into the fray, positioning himself in front of Alaia as her final defense. He shouted at her to retreat, to go back to the surface, thinking only that he could defend her long enough to escape before he died himself.

But instead, Alaia drew a small carved figurine from within her robes and began to speak in a low, firm voice.

Krailash knew, intellectually, that Alaia was a powerful shaman. He'd seen her spirit companion prowling around camp almost daily for decades, and had been healed by her magic during his service. But he'd never thought of her as a *warrior*, because she'd never gone into battle before.

So at first, he thought it was some new form of derro attack when two immense, humanoid figures made of stone tore themselves loose from the tunnel walls. But instead of attacking his wounded men, they pushed past them and began to batter at the derro. The spraying crossbow bolts made no impression on the stone men, who laid about with blunt fists. They had no finesse, these mountain-men; but they had power. Derro flew back, clearing the entrance, and allowing his men to fan out and flank the enemy. There weren't that many derro left standing by then, only a dozen or so, and between the stone men Alaia had summoned, the ripping tusks of her spirit boar attacking them from the rear, and the men doing their best to fight on despite their wounds, the attackers didn't stand a chance.

Krailash noticed one of the derro—armed neither with a club nor a crossbow, but with shackles dangling from his belt—attempting to slip down one of the side tunnels. With a roar, Krailash used his breath weapon, disgorging a cone of icy wind that struck the derro

slaver and froze him in place. Swinging his battle-axe, Krailash cut down the few derro that were still moving until he stood before the shivering slaver. The derro was almost child-sized, no taller than a dwarf and more slender, with eyes as blank as a snowy field and dead white strawlike hair sticking up in ugly tufts. The slaver wore leather armor, but of a disturbingly pale hue, and Krailash wondered what animal—or person—had given its skin to make that leather. He snatched the shackles from the slaver's belt. "Do you speak a civilized tongue?"

"Tongue is delicious," it said in Common, speaking from lips tinged blue by cold. "Never had lizard tongue." The slaver tittered.

Krailash glanced around. The stone men had vanished, merging back into the walls. Two of his men, Ramsey and young Lukas, appeared to be dead. The others were being tended by Alaia, who was quietly praising their bravery. He pointed to Morris and Hemingwood, the two who seemed least harmed and said, "You, watch the other tunnels. We don't want to be surprised again." Returning his attention to the derro, he said, "Do you want to live? Or do you want to end up like your fellows here?"

The derro shrugged, ice crystals showering from its shoulders, seemingly indifferent to the death all around it. The creature actually yawned, and its breath was all mushroom reek and carrion stink. Krailash struck it across the face with one of his great mailed hands, and the derro spun and fell to the ground, breaking the tendrils of ice that held it to the tunnel. The derro rose, still tittering, blood running down its face from a broken nose. "Are you my father? He used to hit me just exactly the same way."

"I want to know where you take the slaves you capture," Krailash said.

"Did you lose a little boy? We didn't even have to hunt him. He came here and fell in a hole. Like a gift from above for the Slime King."

Krailash wondered if that was some dark deity, or a title taken by whatever crazed monster led the derro, or something else, but it didn't really matter. "I will have him back," he said. "Or I will destroy every member of your filthy race. Do you understand? Does that penetrate your lunacy? You haven't taken some jungle-dwelling savage this time. You've stolen someone with powerful friends."

The derro's eyes widened in mock surprise. "A *valuable* slave then. Our savants will be pleased. Perhaps they'll send you little pieces of him on feast days."

Krailash took the creature's tiny neck in his fist, but didn't squeeze. Not yet. Withholding that pressure was difficult, but Krailash was a being of iron will. "I will crush the life out of you."

The creature shrugged again. "You aren't above in the bright day now, lizard-man. You're in our world, in the dark, on the doorstep of the Far Realm. You will suffer. You will be consumed."

"Perhaps you're right," Krailash said, struck by an inspiration. "We have a psion who can pry open your mind and find all your secrets. We'll know everything you know within the hour. We'll just take you to the surface—"

The derro began to flail so violently that Krailash almost lost his grip. Seizing the slaver by both arms—he wriggled like a live eel—Krailash grinned, showing his triangular teeth. The mention of the psion hadn't frightened the creature. But the mention of the *surface* ... "The sun is very bright up there, you know. In the jungle? It is merciless, and bright, and the sky goes on forever."

"It's night now," the creature whispered, its eyes wide. "I've been to the surface before. I go to steal people away. It doesn't frighten me." The creature's trembling gave the lie to that.

"But you go at night, don't you? In the hours before dawn. And you always scurry back to your hole before the sun comes up. Have you ever seen the sun? It's a great eye of fire in the sky. I can cut off your eyelids and stake you out on the ground so you have to stare up at the sun."

“No!”

Krailash shrugged. “Once my psion empties your mind, why not? As good a way as any to dispose of trash like you.”

The derro closed its terrible eyes. “I can take you. To the slave pens.”

“You can, and you will,” Krailash said, and bound the slaver’s hands with its own iron shackles.

When Alaia and his remaining four men were ready to move again, Krailash nudged the derro with his boot. “Lead us,” he said. The derro showed him a trapdoor in the floor, and Krailash managed the tricky feat of descending an impossibly long ladder above a shackled prisoner held on a chain leash. The rest of the party followed him down, the spirit boar flickering and reappearing at the bottom of the shaft.

“Which way?” Krailash said when the path at the end of the shaft dead-ended at a corridor running off to the left and right.

“Left,” the derro said. “Nothing the other way but pit traps and grell.”

Krailash had spent many years in dungeons during his youth, and he had no fondness for either of those things, assuming they really waited down that tunnel. He wished the psion—what was her name?—were here. Her kind could sense a lie. “If you’re not telling the truth, the rest of your life will be very short, but it will also be so unpleasant that you’ll wish it was even *shorter*.”

The derro shrugged and inclined its head to the left. Krailash nodded. “Men, two of you in front of me. Alaia, if you’d stay behind me. And two more men to cover the rear.”

They walked in silence, Krailash’s head brushing the low ceiling. Eventually the derro stopped, nodding to a patch of porous orange stone. “Wormrock. Practically alive. Grows fast, so we use it to hide our passages. We just need to dig through here.”

Krailash frowned. "If you brought Julen this way, then surely it hasn't had time to grow back yet."

The derro tittered. "*He* went right. Fell in a pit trap. That's how they caught him. But this is the fastest way to the pens. We might even beat him there. Wouldn't that be nice for you? Get there before they decide whether to eat him or make him a mushroom farmer or give him to the Slime King as a toy?"

Krailash gestured. "Cayley, Fallon, Morris, Hemingwood—break through this rock." The guards, all seasoned men who'd served with Krailash for years, obligingly stepped forward and hacked with their hand axes. The wormrock crumbled easily, leaving behind negligible piles of dust, and it wasn't long before they'd chopped their way through into another tunnel, that one vast, easily seventy feet wide, roughly-gouged and streaked with dark black and red patches that Krailash wanted to believe was some cave lichen, but which looked much more like ancient dried blood. "What is this place?" Krailash said.

"We call it the Causeway," the slaver said, and tittered. "It's the cause of no end of trouble. Some great monster crawled through here, clawing its way through the rock, in the long long ago. Left a path so wide and broad and clear that fools think it's safe."

Another titter, and Krailash cuffed him on the side of the head.

"Just lead."

They followed the Causeway for more than an hour, the passage angled steeply down all the while. The derro muttered about all the things that might kill them, and no number of cuffs to the ear or hissed orders could make it shut up for long. The sense of impending danger was so intense that Krailash began wishing something *would* attack them, just to break the tension. Spending too much time in the dark could make one go mad, Krailash thought. No wonder the derro were insane.

"Welcome to the depths," the slaver said at one point, and giggled. "No more simple Upperdark for you. No basements or mineshafts or

quarries or pitiful surface scratchings in the earth, no, no. We're two miles down, at least, and some of the things that live here think the sun and stars are just stories told to frighten children. Can you feel the wonderful weight of all that stone above us?"

"Shut up," Krailash growled.

Finally, after another long period of silent trudging and tense watchfulness, their prisoner pointed to a dark mouth of stone off to one side. "There. That's the passageway."

The hole was narrow enough that Krailash wasn't sure he'd make it through without a pickaxe to widen the way, but by twisting his shoulders, he shoved his body through. He dragged the derro in after him by its chain, and pushed it to the front. The others filed in and gaped around. They were in a cavern obviously carved over centuries by long-gone flowing water. Bulging crystals emerged from the walls, some of them glowing with faint purplish light, and towering stalagmites rose from the floor. The party continued into the cavern for a while, and the slaver got more and more agitated as they went. "This way, this way!" The derro bounced on its heels, so eager to move forward that Krailash immediately feared an ambush, and tugged its chain, drawing it up short.

"There's something strange about this one," Alaia said, squinting at one of the stalagmites, far larger than the others they'd passed. "I don't think it's made of stone. It seems to be ... How strange. Helmets, and rusting swords, and a cart wheel, and the belly of a wood stove, held together with something sticky, like sap. Something *made* this."

A distant noise impinged on Krailash's consciousness. The Underdark was not a very quiet place, really: the echo of footsteps reverberated hugely; there were rumbles of distant earthquakes or, more likely, creatures burrowing all around them; and the constant trickle and drip and roar of subterranean water was a rising and falling background hum. But the new sound was not like any of

those: it was a *buzz*, like a swarm of small insects close by your head.

Or a swarm of very large insects rather farther away.

He jerked the tittering derro's chain. "What *is* this place?"

"You'll know soon enough," it said. "It's a swordwing nest."

Krailash stared at the hideous prisoner. He'd never encountered a swordwing, but he'd once adventured with a dwarf named Halbert Hammerfist who had. The dwarf liked to boast of how his party had broken through the wall of a dungeon into a cavern and found it alive with hideous flying monsters. They'd slain the creatures, and found their nest, which was filled with treasures and relics looted from a thousand murders. Upon further questioning, the dwarf had gloomily admitted that everyone else in his party had died within moments of the swordwings' initial attack, and that he himself had survived only by expending a wish he'd been granted by a djinn. Hammerfist had carried an axe with a viciously serrated blade he'd fashioned from the arm of one of the swordwings, and that blade had lent credence to his otherwise improbable description of the monsters. Human-sized insects with four immense wings each, bodies covered in chitinous armor of razored spikes, with limbs that were living weapons, capable of slicing a man in two right through his armor. Darting so fast in flight that they seemed to teleport—it was possible they *did* teleport—and attacking in coordinated teams, they were death on the wing, and the dwarf reckoned they were the most dangerous things he'd ever encountered in a lifetime of adventuring aboveground and below.

"Swordwings," Krailash said, and shook the derro. "Are you mad? We'll all die! You too!"

"Yes," the derro said placidly. "But I'll die down here in the dark where I'm supposed to, not under some horrible sun."

Krailash lifted his head as the sound of buzzing intensified, and started to shout a retreat, but then the derro looped its leash-chain around Krailash's throat and began trying to strangle him to death.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

WHAT STRUCK JULEN THE MOST PROFOUNDLY WAS HOW dark the Underdark *wasn't*. Oh, at first it had been all shadow and mineshafts and abyssal depths, and his captors didn't bother with torches or sunrods, but in the past hour he'd counted at least four separate kinds of natural illumination: glowing fungus; crystals lit with an inner light; patches of shining cave wall that must be the glowstone he'd read about; and disgusting, many-legged insects, big as mice, that swarmed over especially damp portions of the caverns and glowed like fireflies, but larger. As they descended ever deeper, Julen began to think the areas of absolute darkness were rarer than those in which there was some form of light. True, none of those lights were bright enough to read by, or even to tie your bootlaces by, but when deprived of light for too long, the human eye could make great use of even the faintest illumination, and with effort could turn a candle into a lantern and a lantern into a sun.

Not that he much liked what he saw. The two derro dragging him along were remarkably boring captors—they'd even stopped singing. They'd paused once, in what Julen sensed was a dark immense cavern, and barked harsh phrases into the air, to no response that Julen could discern. Perhaps they'd been negotiating with some crawling horror, or just reassuring sentries that they were friend not foe. From there they'd moved into gradually better-lit passages, and he'd determined that they were shorter than himself, and thinner, wearing filthy and scuffed leather armor, armed with chain whips, and with dirty white shocks of hair. He couldn't speak to their facial features because they hadn't once turned to look at him. That was good, since he was still leaving chalk marks for Zaltys to follow, but it was hard not to feel like a sentient sack of potatoes. Julen was considering—not seriously, but

just as a thought experiment—trying to escape, just to make *something* happen, when the two derro stopped at a place where two tunnels branched off in separate directions.

This particular bit of cavern, a chamber the size of Alaia's wagon, was aswarm with those greenish glowing bugs, and Julen's body crushed the ones that didn't scurry away fast enough as he was dragged along. When their bodies burst, the smell was foul, and he would have gagged, but that would have meant opening his mouth, and the possibility of one of these insects crawling over his tongue was too horrific to contemplate.

One of the derro crouched, grabbed one of the bugs, and took a bite out of it as if chomping into an apple. He chewed, flat long face almost thoughtful, as green fluid ran down into his filthy beard. After a moment he gestured, negligently, toward the leftmost of the two tunnels that opened off the bug-filled space.

"Too slow," the other derro said, in perfectly comprehensible Common. "Other way's faster."

The bug-eater responded in the thudding, sonorous tones that Julen assumed were Deep Speech, and gestured more forcefully.

His companion sneered. "Don't care. I'm not afraid. I'm *hungry*."

Bug-eater offered his handful of leaking, still-twitching insect, and the argumentative derro slapped it away. "I want meat that *screams*. Meat that can ask me *not* to eat it."

The bug-eater gestured to Julen, who had never imagined that such a casual wave of the hand could make his bowels clench and his muscles tense and the hairs on the back of his neck rise.

"Nah. Young, strong, better for other things. Slime King wouldn't like it if we ate him."

Bug-eater shrugged, pointed to the leftmost tunnel, and said something else in Deep Speech.

“Fine, but I’ll get there faster, *and* I’ll have the slave, and you’ll just have bug juice on your face, ha!”

That argument did not dissuade Bug-eater, who headed into the tunnel and vanished from sight. The last derro grunted and pulled on Julen’s chain, dragging him, seemingly effortlessly, toward the other tunnel—which was, fortunately, almost entirely insect-free.

Just one of them now, Julen thought. Could he take just one of them? Yes, he was bound, but he was also Guardian trained, and there were things a man could do even trussed up like a pig for a holiday dinner—not many things, admittedly, and none of them obviously useful in his situation, but it seemed like too good an opportunity to pass up. As they passed into the darkness of the new, narrow tunnel, Julen decided to try talking first, perhaps lull his captor into a sense of security, maybe even get his bonds loosened. “If you untied these chains a little, I could walk, and you wouldn’t have to pull me.”

The derro didn’t answer.

“Look, I know you can understand me, I heard you talking. Your accent is atrocious, but we can communicate. Why not talk with me?”

“Speaking meat is my favorite meat,” the derro said, but as if musing aloud, not talking to Julen at all. “Sometimes it talks even while you’re eating it, if you start eating it at the right place.” The derro was almost shouting, because the sound of running water, a distant constant background noise until then, had grown closer and louder.

Julen raised his voice too. “Look, then, just to pass the time, just a conversation, what can that hurt? Tell me, why didn’t your friend want to go this way? And why did you kill the other one, the one who was talking about labyrinths?”

“But eventually it stops speaking and it just becomes meat and sometimes that’s better. Sometimes I don’t like to hear anyone talking but *me*, because nobody else says anything worth hearing, no one else says anything any better than what *meat* says.” The

derro gave an especially vicious jerk of the chain. “Down we go, chattering meat. Watch yourself. This is the *fast way*.”

The derro hurled Julen into a fast-rushing channel of icy water that thundered inexorably down. The shock of cold, and the desperate attempt to roll over to get his face out of the water and save himself from drowning, drove all thought from Julen’s head. The derro jumped in after him, still gripping the chain, and they rode the slick, narrow channel of water down through pure blackness. I can’t mark my passage, he thought, and indeed, the chalk had been dashed from his grasping fingers when the derro flung him into the water. No one will ever find me, and I’ll never find my way out.

On the plus side, the luminescent bug guts staining his leathers were washed away.

The derro above him giggled wildly, clearly delighting in the ride. After what seemed an eternity of spitting water and gasping for breath and trying to force his chained, contorted body to obey his instructions, things got even worse. Julen went airborne, flying into empty space. The presence of faint light from glowing red crystals on the new cavern walls gave him no comfort, because as he spun in empty air, the illumination allowed him to see what waited below: a vast pool of water, tinted the hue of blood by the crystals’ light.

Julen was a decent swimmer. But not when his ankles were bound to his wrists. He crashed down into the pool of subterranean water. Near-freezing wet blackness closed over him.

Then he began to drown.



Krailash reached behind him and grabbed the derro, plucking it from his back as effortlessly as he would pick a tick from a dog’s coat. The creature was a flailing, biting, snapping thing, but derro were *small*, so Krailash tore it loose and hurled it at the nearest of the descending shapes to emerge from the darkness overhead. The derro squawked as it struck the swordwing, but it was the last sound the slaver would ever make: the buzzing, man-sized flying

monster sliced the derro apart with deft slashes of its chitinous, wickedly serrated limbs. Their heads were insectlike, eyes bulging and expressionless, and their mouthparts were complex and endlessly moving.

“Fall back!” Krailash shouted, and his men—terrified though they must have been at such alien horrors—formed a defensive wall of steel protecting Alaia and the path to the cavern entrance. The dragonborn rushed to Alaia’s side and said, “We’re all dead, unless you have a trick to get us out of this.”

“Keep me alive long enough to come up with something,” the shaman said levelly.

“Better if you just escape,” Krailash said, “while we fight them off. I can’t promise to hold them long.”

And then the swordwings were upon them. Krailash let himself fall into the battle state: he was no longer a thinking creature with a conscious mind, or hopes, or dreams. He was a machine that identified threats and killed them. Krailash worked through the techniques his long-ago teacher, an unusually soft-spoken half-orc who could split a bull’s skull with a casual swing of his great two-handed sword, had taught him. The battle-axe sang in Krailash’s hands, and his muscles sang too, as he stepped through the most advanced forms of assault he knew. The fangs of steel: a lunge to bloody one enemy, followed by a spin to smash another from the air. The skullcrusher: an overhand blow to make an enemy stumble in a daze, reeling and easy to finish off. The exorcism of steel, used to sever a swordwing’s lethal arm at the elbow, rather than making a human opponent drop his sword. One swordwing swung at him from above and behind with a blow so hard it staggered him to his knees, but the monster’s barbed arm got stuck in Krailash’s armor, trapping it, and the dragonborn swung his axe back in a movement that would have embedded the blade in his own spine if the swordwing hadn’t been there to catch the edge first. He shook off the clinging enemy and stepped into the vorpal tornado form, whirling and spinning and striking any swordwing that entered his

deadly storm of steel, spraying icy breath to freeze them and make them fall from the air as he fought.

After he'd killed half a dozen, the weapon in his hands began to hum, its old and unreliable enchantment coming to life. Krailash grinned. The axe's magic only manifested when it was well soaked in blood—or, apparently, the black slime swordwings had in place of blood—but that was, after all, usually when Krailash needed it most. The axe was sometimes called Thunder's Edge, and he swung it in a hard, flat arc in the direction of a group of hovering swordwings. The blade didn't touch them—they were too far away—but a wave of concussive force flew from the axe and sent them tumbling through the air and smashing into their fellows.

Being in the heat of battle again after so long working as, essentially, an exterminator killing jungle vermin, was a thrill. But he knew death was inevitable. His men were dead or dying, Krailash himself was bleeding from dozens of cuts on his hands and head and tail—the portions not well protected by armor—and the swordwings kept coming, flickering through space in an unnatural way, as numerous as bees in a hive, and as indifferent to the death of their fellows. He would make them pay well for his death, but he could not deprive them of it. His only regret was that Alaia, Zaltys, and Julen—members of the family he was honor-sworn to protect—might not make it out of the horrible world underground.

Suddenly, the cavern filled with snakes: huge, coiling, spectral. Their bodies passed through Krailash, suffusing him with strange energies. Suddenly he could move with the speed of a striking snake, and he redoubled his efforts to drive back the swordwings—and after a few moments, his whirling axe found nothing to bite. The swordwings were occupied fighting the surging snakes that roiled all around. They might have been only spirits, but where their jaws closed, the swordwings were devoured or snapped in two, and there seemed as many snakes as enemies.

Krailash paused, dazed, and then Alaia touched his arm. “Come on!” she shouted, and rushed toward the place where they'd entered the

cavern. He looked around for his men, but the snakes had appeared too late to help any of them, and all were lost—Cayley's head nearly severed by a swordwing's strike, Hemingwood facedown and unmoving surrounded by the limbs of enemies, Fallon transfixed by a spear jutting from a tower of junk, Morris's upper body some feet away from his lower half. Krailash muttered a brief thanks, in case their spirits lingered, and then hurried after Alaia. The agility the spirits had given him was sufficient to allow him to sprint, quite a trick given the weight of his armor.

They made their way through the crack in the wall where the treacherous derro had led them away from the Causeway. "Stand back," Krailash growled, facing the crack in the wall. Thunder's Edge still hummed in his hands, and he swung, aiming its destructive force at the stone before them. The wall collapsed in a pile of black stones, sealing the entryway.

Krailash sagged to his knees, the spirit strength draining away, his injuries catching up with him. "Never seen anything like that before," he murmured.

"I'd never done it before," Alaia said, touching his arm. "Probably the second most powerful magic I know. My teacher called it the Sea of Serpents." She shook her head. "I don't much like snakes, even if they aren't *real* snakes, exactly."

"Those snakes saved your life," Krailash said.

"Both of our lives," she corrected.

"I'm not so sure," the dragonborn said. He closed his eyes, sinking into a warm and enveloping inner blackness that no weapon he'd ever studied could combat.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

JULEN HAD HEARD DROWNING WAS ACTUALLY A VERY peaceful way to die, second only to dying of exposure in a snowstorm, where, as he understood it, the snow actually began to feel soothing and warm, and you simply dropped off to a sleep from which you never awoke.

He'd never actually seen snow, so he couldn't speak to the pleasantness or unpleasantness of such a death, but he felt quite qualified to state that drowning was, in fact, a truly horrible way to die. Drowning while chained with no possibility of saving oneself through heroic physical effort was even worse for being more psychologically debilitating. Drowning, while chained, in the crushing blackness of the Underdark, while also failing to help the cousin you were in love with, seemed to him perhaps the worst way to die of all.

He tried to hold his breath at first, of course, hoping the derro would save him somehow. Julen was supposed to be a slave, after all, a valuable commodity, and letting him die in a pool of water seemed irresponsible. It was certainly bad business. Julen thought fleetingly that a member of the Traders would never allow such wastage, which was a point in their favor. But derro were mad. Maybe his captor had drowned as well, or simply been distracted by a passing prey animal or a shiny stone, and forgotten all about his prisoner.

Holding his breath was hard, because the shock of hitting the icy water had driven the air from his lungs, and he felt the need to suck in air almost immediately. After what seemed an hour but was probably no more than a minute, blackness began to creep into the edges of his vision. That surprised Julen, because the bottom of the

pool was *already* black, utterly lightless, but there was a greater blackness encroaching. Then a new sensation began, like his chest being squeezed in the hands of a giant, and his eyes prickled and burned, and his brain felt hot in his skull.

And he couldn't hold his breath anymore. He sucked in a breath, and water filled his nostrils and his throat.

After that it was actually rather peaceful, though only because he lost consciousness.



The peace didn't last long. Someone struck him hard on the back and he vomited water, no longer ice cold, but warmed from being inside his body. Julen gagged, shuddered, and convulsed, the muscles of his abdomen clenching and unclenching painfully, and he stared at the puddle on the stones before him. He was on his belly, still chained, in a not-entirely-dark cavern, and he was alive, though he felt like he'd been turned inside out, and every breath was like a rasp being drawn across his innards.

"Good strong boy," his derro captor said, and smacked him on the back again, hard. "You'll make a good worker. You died a little there, I think. See anything interesting, in death? Any secrets? I like secrets."

"A snake," Julen said, remembering as he spoke. His voice was a serrated croak. He couldn't think of any snake gods, though his aunt the shaman had mentioned a World Serpent once or twice, some kind of primal spirit, he gathered. Was that what he'd seen? It seemed rather darker than that. And insofar as he'd been able to read its expression, the creature had seemed amused by his death—a malicious pleasure, not wise understanding. The vision he'd seen was more like a snake made of shadows, not unlike the one Zaltys had killed and he'd skinned. Perhaps it was simply that snake's ghost, waiting beyond death to take revenge on Julen's own spirit. Happy thought.

The snake in his vision had been a lot larger than the shadow snake, though. And it had looked much smarter, and more hungry.

“Snake? Hmm.” The derro continued thumping him on the back, though less violently. “The serpent is a great symbol. Mythic ancestor of great heroes. Devourer and progenitor, cyclical manifestations, the transformation of death into life. Seer, healer, sea monster, tempter, death in the dark, worm with pretensions, keeper of earthly knowledge, wellspring of poison. A vision of snakes can mean almost anything.” He shrugged. “I was a savant once, before I was a slaver. My gift was to interpret the dreams of the Slime King. But the Slime King doesn’t sleep, so they gave me shackles and a whip and sent me to do useful work instead.” He jerked Julen’s chain and began dragging him again, around the perimeter of the dark pool. The light there came from red crystals, so faint they’d been invisible under the water, but bright enough to see by once he’d been saved.

Julen realized his path was totally obscured. Zaltys was an excellent tracker, but even she wouldn’t be able to trace his passage down a waterfall. He was well and truly trapped with the lunatic and his mad people. Death was almost literally the best thing he could hope for.

Then his captor sprouted an arrow from his throat, gurgled, and fell. “Zaltys!” Julen shouted, exalted.

But it wasn’t Zaltys that rose up from the pool’s black water, and when the derro’s corpse began moving, he realized it wasn’t an arrow that had killed his captor, but a harpoon—a harpoon being reeled toward the pool by its wielder, who watched Julen with huge, watery eyes.

Suddenly the derro, which at least looked vaguely human and sometimes spoke his language—even if they said things that didn’t make sense—didn’t seem so bad. The creature with the harpoon was joined by three others, emerging from the water silently.

“Kuo-toa,” Julen whispered. The drawings he’d seen in the books on the Underdark in the family library didn’t do the creatures justice. “Loathsome fish-things,” that was how they’d been described, and while they bore enough resemblance to ordinary fish to assure he’d never enjoy a seafood dinner ever again, they were as big as humans, with hands that could grip weapons, and fangs protruding from their jaws. The one with the harpoon pulled the derro into the pool—the same pool where Julen himself had so recently drowned. Those *things* had been underneath him? The pool must connect to some subterranean network of rivers traveled by the creatures. No wonder it was considered a dangerous route. Bug-eater had been wise to take the long way down. It was faster, and maybe even fun if you weren’t chained up when you went flying from the river into the pool, but you ran the risk of being captured by fish-monsters who worshiped unheard-of gods.



Zaltys was sufficiently energized by her successful massacre of the floating jellyfish monsters that she almost wanted to shout for the derro to come out and face her, thinking she could pretty easily put them down too, but good sense won out over suicidal self-confidence. She didn’t worry about the light of her sunrod, assuming that, by that point, she’d fallen so far behind Julen’s captors that there was little chance of running into them, and reluctant to plunge herself into darkness again. Light was hard to give up once she had it. She soon realized the sunrod wasn’t strictly necessary, though. Even beyond the reach of her light she could see patches of illumination as she wound through tunnels with her snake companion.

She’d heard stories of rangers who formed close bonds with animals—*actual* animals, not the spectral pig her mother could summon—but she’d never expected to pick up a pet against her will. Perhaps the snake just thought following her was a good survival strategy. Any predator they encountered would probably focus on Zaltys first, both because she was more obviously a threat and because her body would provide a lot more sustenance when eaten.

Zaltys eventually reached a cavern crawling with hideous fist-sized insects with green, glowing bodies. What could they possibly be feeding on? Probably better if she didn't know. She kicked a few out of her way, and noticed the smushed remains of several bodies. Good. Even without chalk marks, it was clear someone had passed that way recently, probably being dragged. There were two tunnels leaving from the room, one heading left, one right. She peered into the dimness, and didn't see much to choose between them. The drag-path through the crushed bodies looked like it bore right, but it was hard to say—at least two other humanoids had tromped around the fork in the path, killing their own bugs, and the surviving insects were rapidly trundling away with the bodies of their fallen, presumably for a nice snack rather than a proper burial, which further obscured the signs of passage.

She chose right, for no particular reason other than intuition, but didn't have to go far to have her intuition proved wrong. The roar of water rose, and the light from her sunrod revealed that the tunnel narrowed and merged with a rushing stream of water—very nearly a river—which disappeared down a long slope and wound out of sight. Hard to imagine slavers going *that* way, even if they were mad.

She retraced her steps, the snake unperturbed by the change in direction, and went down the other tunnel. That one was rather twistier and more circuitous, no bigger than the narrow hallways in the servants' quarters of the family villa back home, and though the slope was never terribly steep, she was certainly descending ever downward. There were no more chalk marks, which was worrisome. She rounded a curve and found a derro bent over at the waist, hands on his knees, vomiting noisily. The puddle on the floor had chunks of glowing green bug parts in it, and when he looked up at her, the derro's white beard was streaked with luminous juices. His eyes, permanently wide anyway, widened farther. Zaltys was too close even to fire the hand crossbow, so she stepped forward, spun on the ball of her foot, and smashed him in the face with her elbow. The derro's head snapped back and bashed against the stone

wall, leaving him dazed long enough for Zaltys to sweep his feet out from under him. After he hit the floor, she snatched the iron shackles from his belt and snapped them onto his wrists, where they magically tightened.

But she had a problem. She could kill him, but something in her balked at murdering a humanoid that was unconscious and chained—the jellyfish-things might have had a rich culture and vast intellects, but they looked sufficiently inhuman that she hadn't hesitated to slay them. The derro, on the other hand, looked almost like a child, and even knowing he was a sadistic cruel slave-taker who'd stolen her original family couldn't sufficiently steel her to put a dagger in his eye. She could try to wake him up and force him to tell her where his people lived, as she'd originally planned, but knowing how mad the creatures were, how could she trust anything he said? If she just left him there, though, one of his brethren would surely discover him eventually and raise the alarm, and since she was in the caverns of the derro, they'd surely find her no matter how skilled she was at melting into shadow.

Better to stash him out of sight somewhere, so if he woke up, no one would find him for a while. Surely there was a useful dark hole she could stuff him into, even though he hadn't seen any branch paths at all along the winding tunnel. Continuing forward was dangerous—what if he'd been part of a larger group that had moved on when he felt the need to empty his guts of bug meat? They might be back soon.

She sighed. She could think of one place to take him. After disarming the derro—and burdening herself with his weapons, so they wouldn't be found littering the tunnel—she bound his bootlaces together to make a handle, and started dragging him by the feet behind her, back the way she'd come. The weight of the two packs she was carrying was bad enough, but she also had to drag someone who, though small, didn't weigh that much less than *she* did. All those hours roaming the jungles were time well spent, and she was up to the physical task, but it was exhausting.

Looking back once, she saw the albino snake had climbed onto the derro's chest and lay coiled there, apparently asleep. There was something profoundly odd about that animal.

Finally she made it back to the cavern of bugs, and hauled the derro toward the right-hand tunnel. There was no reason any derro would venture into a dead-end that led to an icy waterfall, so it was probably a safe place to stash him. As the noise of roaring water grew, the derro jerked and twisted in her grip, and she dropped his legs, whirling to face him. He shouted something guttural, and though Zaltys couldn't understand the language, she understood the tone—terror. "What?" she said. "Don't worry, I'm not going to kill you."

"Not down there," the derro gasped as the snake slithered off his chest. "No ... throw water."

Zaltys frowned. "Why on earth would I throw you into the ..."

Her eyes fell on something glowing faintly blue in the shadows. She hadn't noticed it before. At first she thought it was more of that damnable glowing fungus, but it wasn't. It was a stub of chalk—the chalk Julen had used to mark his passage. Zaltys looked at the rushing waterfall. "Did you throw my cousin down there?" Her voice was level and steady, and so was her hand when she drew the repeating crossbow and pointed it at the derro's face. "Did you?"

"No, no me. Other me. Water faster. But not safer."

"You mean another derro took Julen? You *travel* this way?"

"Fast way. Fast way down." The derro gabbled something in his own tongue, which didn't prove illuminating, but Zaltys understood enough. She considered putting a bolt through one of the creature's wide white eyes—the terrible cold fury and howling emptiness she'd felt when she thought the derro had drowned Julen for sport still lingered. But she lowered the crossbow. She would kill derro in the tunnels, she was sure, but she didn't have to start with him.

Zaltys took a moment to strap her packs together more firmly, verify that her bow case was well sealed, and make sure everything that shouldn't get wet was wrapped tightly in oilcloth. Back in Delzimmer, there was a grassy hill behind the main villa, with a steep slope covered in long grasses, and some of the Serrat children would take mats of woven reeds out and use them to sled down the hill, laughing as they reached tremendous speeds. Zaltys had always found that fun. Maybe the river would be fun too. Except wetter, and colder, and descending into unknown depths, and then there was the matter of the bug-eating derro saying that way was "not safer."

Safety was fairly low on her list of concerns, though.

With a last check that her equipment was secure, Zaltys climbed down onto a stone outcroppping and lowered herself beside the water, just where it came rushing out of a crack in the rock. She reached down, putting her hand in the water—cold!—and feeling the stone beneath, which was at least worn refreshingly smooth. Tearing herself open on a sharp outcropping would be no fun at all. Holding her packs in front of her, with the straps tied around her chest, and the sunrod clutched in one hand, she slipped into the water. That part of the slope was almost flat, which meant she'd have to launch herself forward deliberately.

She took a breath, hoped there'd be a soft landing at the end, and scooted forward, consigning herself to gravity. At least she'd finally be rid of that unusually clingy snake.

Just before she was well out of earshot, the derro shouted something. She wasn't entirely sure the word was in her language, and it didn't seem to mean anything in particular, but it rang in her head as she rode the river down deeper into the dark.

The word had sounded like "fishmeat."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

THE TRIO OF KUO-TOA CAME CRAWLING OUT OF THE pool, hauling their repulsive, shimmering bodies onto the stone floor of the cavern. Yes, Julen thought, I've eaten my last seafood dinner. Nothing but meat and greens and fruit for me from now on, and the livelihood of the hardworking fishermen of Delzimmer be damned. The Kuo-toa seemed more curious about him than openly aggressive, though who could say for sure? They had the heads of *fish*. Their expressions were the very definition of inscrutable. Still, the best-case scenario was they'd ignore him and leave him to starve to death. It seemed far more likely they'd murder him outright, or try to enslave him, though how would they drag him through their underwater tunnels without him dying in the process? Presumably they had some magic to address the problem.

Pondering such things helped him keep the paralyzing fear at bay, more or less, though what did it matter if he were paralyzed? He was *chained*, which was almost worse.

Someone came hurtling over the waterfall and landed in the pool with a titanic splash. Could it be Bug-eater, having changed his mind about taking the scenic route, come to rescue Julen from slavery in order to press him into another flavor of slavery? From his angle on the cavern floor, next to the bloodstain that was the only thing left of his dream-interpreting captor, he couldn't see much at all to prove his hypothesis. The kuo-toa all turned, though, not so much whirling on the balls of their finned feet as dragging their bodies around in a half-circle to face the pool. They were obviously amphibious, but their bodies were clearly made more for moving underwater. They'd probably be graceful swimming around

under the surface of some horrid lightless sea, but on land they moved like fish with legs, and it wasn't a pretty sight.

Someone came gasping to the surface of the water and started splashing toward the edge of the pool, and Julen couldn't help but feel envy. *He* could have made a decent showing when he fell in the water too, if he'd been unbound. The kuo-toa grunted and squealed and raised their weapons, and the person dragging themselves up out of the water looked up, and saw them, and looked past them, and saw *Julen*.

It was Zaltys. She was dirty, even after her dunk in the river, and so loaded with supplies that she looked like a human pack mule, and her hair was wet and plastered to her face, and her eyes were wide and, if they weren't terrified, it was only because they hadn't yet finished looking surprised.

She'd never looked more beautiful to him, not even in his dreams. The kuo-toa hurled harpoons at her, and she promptly vanished. A nice trick, doubtless courtesy of her fancy new armor. The harpoons splashed harmlessly in the water, and as the kuo-toa reeled them back, peering into the depths to see where their prey had gone, they started to sprout arrows from the backs of their heads. Julen looked up, and Zaltys was standing over him, having emerged from the shadows of the cavern, dropped both her packs at her feet, and drawn her weapon. Her bow seemed no more substantial to his eye than a twist of black smoke against a twilight sky, but the arrows looked precisely like what they were—spinning shafts of death.

The kuo-toa thrashed, exactly like fish caught and tossed to the floor of a boat, gradually going still. They didn't stink like dead fish, yet, but Julen assumed it was only a matter of time. "Nice to see you, Cousin," he said, the casual tone he tried for rather spoiled by the croaking sound of his voice. He wasn't thirsty, precisely, given the gallons of river water he'd swallowed, but the strain of expelling all that water from his body had torn up his throat.

“Good to be seen.” Zaltys kneeled, tugging futilely at his shackles. “Magical chains,” she said. “I have no idea how they work, there’s not even a keyhole.”

“I noticed. A shame I lost my pack. There was a knife inside.”

Zaltys held up a pack by its sodden shoulder straps. “This pack?” She opened it, and drew out the sheath. “This knife?” Drawing the blade, which flashed green in the dim light. “Where did you get this, anyway? Borrow it from your father’s desk drawer?”

Julen shook his head, rattling his chains. “See if it’s magical enough to cut through these, would you?” As Zaltys slipped the blade into the link of a chain, he explained that they had a secret benefactor who’d left the blade and a source of fresh water in his pack, among more mundane supplies. “Any guess who it might be?”

“No idea. No one knew about my plans.” She jammed the blade in and began twisting the hilt.

“Then how did *you* find the pack?”

“Attached to a dead derro in a tunnel,” she said.

“The labyrinth man,” Julen murmured. Zaltys ignored him. “How did you come to find *me*, then?”

“Another derro. A live one. He told me you were down here. Well, he didn’t *tell* me, exactly, but I inferred.”

“Did he have glowing bug guts in his beard?”

“The very one,” she said. “I gather you two met.” She grunted and gave the dagger a final hard twist.

The link holding his wrist shackles to his ankle shackles gave way, and Julen stifled a scream as he was, finally, able to stretch out his limbs. The agony of releasing his cramped muscles was simultaneously horrible and delicious. Zaltys ignored his contented, pained moans and broke the links closest to the shackles on each ankle and both wrists, carefully coiling up the remaining chains and stuffing them into a pack—Julen’s pack, he noticed. Well, that was

fair. She'd been carrying a lot of extra weight. It was his turn. "In case we can use them for something later," she said. "Not sure I can do anything about the shackles themselves, unless you want me to risk jamming this knife between your wrists and the metal ...? No? I thought not."

Julen stood up, continuing to stretch and bend and work his protesting muscles. "It's fine. Chunky metal bracelets and anklets are all the rage among the fashionable youth in Delzimmer this season. So what now? Retrace our steps and flee with our lives?"

"Oh, I don't know," she said. "We've come this far. Might as well see it through, otherwise we've just wasted a lot of time."

"If you insist." He shouldered his pack and looked toward the dead kuo-toa, wondering if they should rifle their bodies to see if they had anything worth stealing. The idea was distasteful in the extreme, not because of any inherent moral hesitation when it came to robbing corpses—he was a member of the Guardians, after all, whose unofficial motto was "Do Whatever's Necessary"—but because the kuo-toa were just so loathsome.

"What do you call those, then? Come across them in your books?"

"Kuo-toa," Julen said. "Fish people."

"Ha. Fishmeat. They're the fish, and I was supposed to be the meat. Some joke."

"You lost me," he said. "But that's all right. I've been down here long enough to be used to being lost."

"These fish people. Are they dangerous?"

Julen nodded. "Reckoned to be one of the most dangerous of the races dwelling in the Underdark, though really, none of those races are what you'd call harmless. Apparently they're prone to plagues of madness that can sweep through a whole community like the flu—or fin fungus, I suppose. These seemed sane enough, but who can guess what's happening in a fish-person's mind?"

“Communities. So this isn’t likely to be some isolated family group, then, that just happens to live in this pool.”

Julen shook his head. “I don’t think so. Hunting or scouting party, I’d guess. The pool is probably connected to a bunch of subterranean tunnels.”

Zaltys sighed. “In that case we’d better be going, and quickly. I was holding onto a sunrod when I fell over the waterfall, but I lost it when I hit the water, and for obvious reasons, I couldn’t swim down to retrieve it. Sunrods are remarkable devices. Did you know they go right on glowing even when they’re submerged in water?”

Julen whistled. “Creatures down here seem to be fairly sensitive to light.”

“Yes. We’ve left a handy beacon for any fishfolk that come swimming by, which will lead them to a trio of their murdered kinsmen.” She put her booted foot on the back of one kuo-toa’s neck, grasped her arrow, and pulled it free, shaking the slimy tissue off the arrowhead before putting it in her nearly-empty quiver. She retrieved the other two arrows, humming tunelessly as she worked.

Julen counted. “Do you really only have nine arrows left?”

“Yes. I do have extra bolts for these horrid little hand crossbows, but I ran into a little trouble and spent several arrows I couldn’t recover.” She nudged a kuo-toa with her foot. “Shame none of this lot were archers. I’d take their harpoons, but I don’t know how to use them, and I’m already clattering when I walk from carrying all this excess ordnance.” She yawned. “Now that we’re together, we’d better find a place to eat and take turns getting a little sleep before we try to find the slaves. I imagine it’s daylight up above by now, and this running around all night is starting to wear on me. And I could do with drying out—this magic armor sheds water nicely, but I’m soaking otherwise. I need to get this stuff off me and air out my skin a bit.”

Julen, distracted by the thought of Zaltys removing her armor and, ah, the things she wore underneath, swallowed hard.

“I don’t suppose we dare to build a fire. The smoke would choke us anyway.” She sighed.

“At least it’s not cold. Or hot either. The Underdark has that advantage over the jungle. I napped a bit while I was being dragged. Very refreshing. So once we find a nice bolt-hole, I’ll take first watch.” They moved away from the pool, their way lit faintly by the glowing crystalline structures on the walls, picking their way around tumbled heaps of rocks, moving along the slight but discernible downward slope.

Zaltys produced Julen’s piece of chalk with a grin and handed it over. Every hundred yards or so he left a mark on a stone or stalagmite so they could find their way back. Although, come to think of it, there wasn’t much point. They couldn’t very well climb *up* the waterfall. They’d have to find another way to the surface. Presumably the derro went up and down all the time, so they could hunt for slaves. Perhaps they’d put up some useful signposts. “Thank you for saving me,” Julen said, more seriously than he usually spoke to his cousin. “I thought I was done for. Several times.”

“Finding you was my only priority,” Zaltys said, patting him on the shoulder in a depressingly sisterly sort of way. “But now that I have, and you haven’t had bits of yourself lopped off for a derro stewpot, it’s back to my original mission. I’m happy to have your help.”

Julen pointed at a ribbon or curling whiteness in the cavern. “Look at that snake. It’s almost like it’s walking along with us.”

“How in the *world*,” Zaltys said, and then swore, rather inventively. “The damn thing’s not even *wet*!”

She’s a strange one, Julen thought, but it’s all right. She’s stolen my heart, and I owe her my life, so she can be as strange as she likes. I’m all sewn up.



Krailash woke with a gasp from a terrible dream. He'd been in the Underdark, all his men massacred by a creature from a treacherous race, Alaia without a proper defense—

Ah. Yes. That was all true. Alaia stroked his scaly brow and said, "Shh, it's all right." She paused. "Actually, it's all terrible. We're trapped miles below the surface and I have no idea where my daughter is. But you're not going to die."

"My injuries ..." He sat up, noting his armor piled in a rather disorderly heap against the far wall of the small, low-ceilinged cavern. The only light came from the faintly glowing body of the spectral boar, but it was enough to see by. He touched his arms and legs, and though they were sore, the skin red with raised welts and crusted with dried blood, there were no gaping wounds, no shattered bones.

"I *am* a shaman," she said. "I couldn't do much for the dead men we had to leave behind, but I was certainly capable of treating the worst of your wounds. You won't die right away, at any rate. The hardest part was getting you into this side tunnel—the boar helped me drag you—and we're still too close to the swordwings' lair for my comfort, but at least I can't hear buzzing. I doubt we're safe, but we're probably in less danger than we would be out in the open on the Causeway." She yawned hugely. "And now that you're awake, *I'm* going to get some sleep. I have no idea if it's even day or night, but it's well past time I got some rest. While I'm out you can formulate a brilliant plan to rescue my daughter and my nephew and get us out of this place alive." Alaia curled up on her side with her cloak bundled for a pillow, and promptly began to snore.

Krailash stood up and tested his body, moving through a battle kata that used nearly every muscle he had, but only going at half-speed. There were a variety of new aches and pains complementing the old familiar twinges and injuries from long ago, but he was still in relatively sound working order for a dragonborn two-thirds of the way through a life of adventuring. These past few decades serving Alaia and her family had made him soft, but he hadn't forgotten all

his training and experience. The derro's betrayal had surprised him. Most intelligent creatures would try to save their own lives, unless they were particularly honor bound or fanatical, but these mad slave-takers couldn't even be counted upon to act in their own self-interest.

Krailash sat and brooded over the dark turn the journey underground had taken while Alaia got her rest. Because doing useful work was the best medicine, he scouted down the corridor. He could understand why Alaia had ducked into the first safe-looking side tunnel, but he disliked being backed into a place with only a single exit. About fifty yards down the corridor, it took a sharp left turn before returning to the Causeway.

A figure robed and cloaked in dusty gray-black cloth sat cross-legged before the entryway to the tunnel. His—her? its?—face was obscured by an equally dark hood, and it held a squirming rat the size of a pheasant in its hands. With a deft twist, the figure snapped the rat's neck in its gloved hands, then pressed the rat into the shadow where its face should have been. Krailash expected horrible sounds of chewing and slurping and cracking bones, but there was only silence, which was somehow worse—as if the intruder had eaten the rat whole in a single swallow.

“Enjoying your stay?” the figure asked, and the voice was male, Krailash supposed—though it was mostly just whispers and a rasp like a dagger on stone. “I have mixed feelings about this place, myself. I have a certain proprietary interest in darkness and treachery, which suit the Underdark, but there are other forces down here that are more or less inimical to me.”

“Who are you?” Krailash said. He'd encountered a god, once, or rather its avatar, while adventuring decades earlier, and though that had been a relatively benevolent being and this one struck him as rather more malevolent, he felt the same sense of outsized presence, as if the being before him were the fin of a shark protruding from the water, the true extent of his form hidden in unfathomable depths. “Are you the Slime King the derro mentioned?” Krailash

didn't think gods made a habit of directly smiting those who killed their subjects, but perhaps the deity of an insane race would be similarly unpredictable. He gripped his axe, though attacking a god with Thunder's Edge would be as effective as attacking a great red dragon with a soup spoon.

The god laughed, like silk cloth rustling. "The Slime King? No. Really, rather ... no. I'd be offended at the suggestion if my people weren't whisperers and keepers of secrets. It's only right you don't know my name. You don't need to. I'm here—or not *here*, but briefly projecting a fragment of my consciousness here—to tell you where to find your wayward child."

"Zaltys? And Julen?" Krailash said.

"Zaltys, anyway. The other doesn't interest me. Do you see this serpent?" A long, pale snake slithered out of the god's sleeve and coiled around Krailash's feet. "Follow it, and it will lead you where you need to go."

Krailash frowned. "The last time I followed the directions of a stranger, I was nearly killed by a hive of swordwings. Why should I believe this time will be any different?"

The god shrugged, one shoulder moving higher than the other, as if he were hunchbacked. Was he deformed under those robes? Which gods appeared in crippled forms? Krailash had never spent enough time listening to clerics. "Stumble in the dark and die, then. I don't mind. Zaltys may succeed without you, but your assistance would certainly help, if you can reach her before something down here kills you. Providing a guide for a while is about as much help as I'm willing to extend to you. And that's mostly because fostering desperate hope amuses me."

"Forgive me," Krailash said, bowing his head, on the theory that gods appreciated signs of respect. "But with your powers, surely you can make sure Zaltys *does* succeed?"

"Of course I could. But this is the realm of the bloody god Ghaunadaur, and where he doesn't rule, Lolth the spider-goddess

does. Neither of those are friends of mine, and even making myself known here to this extent risks drawing their attention, and bringing ... unwanted consequences.”

Just like Quelamia and ... someone else, Krailash thought. Afraid to venture into the dark for fear of calling the attention of foes deadlier than the derro. I’ve never been so glad to be small and unimportant, even if it does mean doing all the work myself.

The god’s robe rustled strangely. “It is more my nature to act indirectly. Biding time until the moment is right, then sending a servant to offer a poisoned cup or slip in a venomous dagger, never ...” The god sniffed. “A frontal assault with an axe.” The god rose to his feet—assuming he had feet. “Follow my serpent, or don’t. Either way you’re unlikely to see the sun again, though Zaltys might.”

“But, *why* do you want to help Zaltys?” Krailash said. “Why would something like you be interested in her?”

“You really don’t remember, do you? What Zaltys truly is? That psion has torn some impressive holes in your mind. But I don’t *tell* secrets, so I won’t help you recover your abused memories. I have an interest in Zaltys—in her mission and in the *woman* herself. If you help her, you may not earn my gratitude, but at least you won’t incur my wrath.” The god waved one gloved hand, and the robe collapsed in a heap, dozens of snakes streaming out of the pile and slithering off in all directions. Krailash prodded the cloak with the shaft of his axe—thinking the garment of a god might be useful to Quelamia—but it just deteriorated into clumps of gray cobwebs. The god hadn’t really been there, then, not exactly—it had fashioned a body of serpents and spider webs to deliver its message.

And its guide. The pale snake remained, slithering around and around Krailash’s boots like a housecat nuzzling its owner’s ankles.

“I am not bound by contract or duty to take orders from a god,” Krailash told the snake. “I’ll tell Alaia and let *her* decide.”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

YES, ALL RIGHT,” ZALTYS SAID. “I KNOW IT’S PROBABLY not *technically* morning, but we woke up, and we had breakfast, so we might as well call it morning.”

“I think it must be closer to midafternoon,” Julen said, peering up at the ceiling of the tunnel as if he might see the sun if he squinted hard enough. “I know it doesn’t matter, but I’ve got a pretty good body clock, and—”

Zaltys suddenly pressed her body against him, flattening him against the tunnel wall. She was a bit taller than he was, so her neck was pressed right against his face, and the scent of her, even sweaty and streaked with cavern dust, was intoxicating and somehow exotic. Her body was pushed against his, and though he couldn’t really *feel* anything—she was in snakeskin armor, after all, with padding under that, and clothes under *that*—the proximity made it easier to imagine feeling her body against his more vividly than had ever been possible before.

Mustn’t kiss her neck, he thought. For one thing, she would slap him, or be quietly horrified, or be amused, and any of those outcomes was worse than the consequences of inaction.

Plus, he knew they were probably quite close to dying at the moment, since the only reason she’d flatten him against the wall with her own body was to hide him in her shadowy aura, and the only reason to do that was to avoid being seen by something horrible, probably a monstrous enemy armed with weapons that had far more barbs than necessity dictated. He did his best to peer over her shoulder, noting that although he could see just fine through the cloak’s shadow of concealment, the world was drained of color and rendered in the stark blacks and smudged grays of a

charcoal drawing. He could see the derro coming down the tunnel well enough—shock of white hair, enormous white eyes, armed with ... a fishing pole?

Admittedly, it appeared that the pole was fashioned from the thighbones of humanoids and baited with a chunk of bleeding organ meat. But still, it was just a fishing pole. He went past them, muttering to himself in Deep Speech, and once he followed a curve and disappeared out of sight, Zaltys slid her body away from his, and color—what color there *was* down there, where the only light came from clumps of glowing crystal—returned to the world.

“If people are just wandering around going on fishing trips, we must be close to their settlement,” Zaltys said, voice in a low whisper.

“Can you imagine fishing in the pools down here? Or eating what you caught?” Julen mimed gagging.

“I’ve only had trail rations two meals in a row, and already raw cave fish don’t sound bad to me,” Zaltys said. “We’ll have to go carefully now.” She uncased her bow and strung it in a few quick, practiced movements that Julen couldn’t entirely follow—she bent at the waist, hooked one end of the bow on the outside of her ankle, trapped that end with her other foot, bent the whole bow practically inside-out with her hands, and somehow slipped the string over the top end. The result was a relatively compact bow with graceful and sinuous curves his eye couldn’t entirely follow. That was probably because it was a magical bow imbued with mystic geometries, though he was willing to admit it might simply be his ignorance regarding the tools of archery.

“Why don’t you leave it strung all the time? More useful that way.”

She shook her head. “Ruins it. Leave a bow strung, and it starts to hold that bent shape, and doesn’t try to stretch back the way it used to be anymore. You lose all the tension that makes the string tight, and without that tension, there’s no power in the draw, no strength behind the bowshot. Eventually the whole bow would go as slack as

an out-of-tune harp, and you'd just have a bent stick with a bit of string tied to it, not a deadly weapon."

"Yes, all right, but that's a *magic* bow, right? I mean, it's probably immune to normal sorts of stresses."

Zaltys looked at him with a combination of exasperation and patience he'd grown accustomed to in the days she'd spent trying to teach him the ways of the jungle. "You may be right. But if it were *your* magical bow, would you risk ruining it? Besides, if you don't have time to string your bow before the enemy's upon you, the bow is no good to you anyway. It's a weapon to use at a distance. If the enemy's close by, you're better off with a knife—or even a pointy stick."

"So what's the plan, exactly? Pick off all the derro we see with arrows and throwing knives? You've got, what, eight or nine arrows? I've got a lot of knives, but probably not one for every derro. I suppose we could throw rocks."

She grimaced. "A frontal assault doesn't seem like a good idea, no. I guess I imagined there'd be a big sort of cage, maybe made of bamboo, with my family locked in it, and I'd just go untie a bit of rope and open the door and we'd sneak out before anyone noticed us. Maybe there'd be a guard or two to subdue first. Do you suppose it's going to be like that?"

He shrugged. "Can't say. As I told you, there were a few things about the derro in the books I read—they're mad, sunlight causes them excruciating pain, they're hated by everyone but aberrations, and they're obsessed with some place called the Far Realm—but they didn't discuss how or where slaves were kept, and Rainer didn't like to talk about it. One thing I learned in the Guardians is, however complicated you expect something to be, prepare for it to be at least twice as complicated. Maybe it won't be, but in that case, you'll be pleasantly surprised. It's better to be overprepared."

"Ha. We've got a magic bow, a few arrows, some crossbows made so badly they might tear themselves apart just from the strain of

firing, a green knife, and a lovely crystal decanter of clean water. Maybe we can trade *that* for the slaves.”

“We’ve got our wits too,” Julen pointed out. “And we’re sane, which must be worth something. I wonder if a diplomatic option is possible—the derro mentioned someone called the Slime King, which means there must be some ultimate authority we could conceivably appeal to. I mean, we *do* come from a ridiculously rich and powerful family, Zaltys. Perhaps we can buy your family out of here? Assuming the sovereign of the derro is less lunatic than his subjects, anyway. The Guardians exist to do the jobs diplomacy can’t, so I don’t mind skulking around, but we haven’t even *tried* diplomacy.”

Zaltys made a face; Julen was astonished to see she was still pretty anyway. “The thought of negotiating with slave-taking murderers doesn’t really appeal to me, but let’s keep it in mind if the other approach fails. We can always claim to be emissaries from the land above. Are you ready? I don’t know what we’ll see when we go around the next curve.”

Julen spread his hands. “Some new wonder, no doubt. Perhaps a pit full of offal, or a stalactite shaped like a humorous body part. Lead on. I’m ready.”

Holding her bow at the ready, moving in a low crouch, Zaltys continued down the tunnel, Julen at her heels.

They got their first look at the derro settlement together.

The tunnel ended in the largest natural cavern they’d yet encountered, so huge the ceiling was impossible to discern, and might have passed for the sky on a cloudy moonless night. There *was* light, in the form of wagon-wheel-sized spheres of bluish green vapor that acted as miniature floating suns, bobbing in the air at irregular intervals. Before them stretched a vast field of fungus, clearly some sort of farm, and creatures of various races labored among the mushrooms, filling baskets with food—Julen recognized kuo-toa, and gray-skinned humanoids that might have been duergar,

and bearlike things with matted fur that he assumed were quaggoths. There were a few figures of unrecognizable species, dressed in voluminous rags—could they be humans? Maybe even Zaltys’s family? A pair of derro roamed lazily among the mushrooms, lashing out with barbed black whips, and the slaves flinched and moaned when the overseers came near, picking mushrooms more quickly.

Beyond the fields, Julen could just make out the silhouette of low buildings, which surprised him—he’d imagined the derro living in warrens of caves, since they didn’t strike him as builders. As they crept along the side of the cavern, skirting the mushroom fields and making their way gradually to the settlement proper, Julen was able to discern more details. The buildings were squat and squarish, made of stone and heavy timbers, exceedingly functional. Julen suspected they’d been built by dwarves—or the dark dwarfkin called duergar—for mining operations, perhaps, and later taken over by derro.

Since then, though, the derro had made improvements. The structures were embellished with lean-tos and more elaborate additions made of cloth and salvaged wood, and many of the roofs boasted spindly towers of splintering wood and, perhaps, bone, with platforms on top, though none were currently inhabited. Every roof sported at least one long, slender spike, and most had several, all draped with garlands made of small bones and topped with skulls: human, derro, duergar, kuo-toa, and others that were unrecognizable. Derro hurried in and out of the buildings, occasionally pausing to speak or attempt to stab one another, some weeping, others giggling, some in scholarly robes carrying armloads of scrolls, and one with an enormous floppy bright green hat that seemed as out of place as an ornamental goldfish in a chamberpot.

“Nice place they have here,” Julen said. “I must hire their decorator for our summer estate.” Zaltys shushed him, and made a run from the edge of the cavern to a refuse-pile on the outskirts of the cluster of buildings. The heap seemed to consist mainly of broken bits of

armor and shattered swords and other odd lengths of ruined metal, which made sense when Julen realized the building nearest the pile was a smithy, sparks of orange light just visible through the open doorway and the *clang* of a hammer on metal ringing out.

Zaltys peered around the edge of the heap, and Julen did his best to look too without exposing himself too much. There were derro passing by near enough that he could have hit one with a throwing knife. Entirely too close for comfort, and no sign of a bamboo cage full of slaves with their bags all packed, just awaiting rescue. A search of the buildings would prove difficult. In a normal city, Julen would have waited until dark, and then crept around for some discreet housebreaking reconnaissance, but who knew when the derro slept? What if they stayed awake in shifts? In eternal darkness, “nocturnal” and “diurnal” cease to be useful descriptive terms.

Beyond the smithy, there was a sort of central courtyard, with an enormous glowing blue-green sphere bobbing in the center. Behind that loomed a building almost as large as the biggest counting house in Delzimmer, with broad stone steps leading up to the towering, square-edged, rather boring-looking pillars in front. Several of the more scholarly-looking derro were bustling up and down the steps, though they weren't *that* much different from their leather-clad brethren; while Julen watched, one derro in a patched midnight blue robe crept up on another one that was reading a scroll, stabbed the reader in the kidneys, snatched up the scroll, and scampered away into the huge building. None of the other derro passing by paid the least bit of attention to the casual murder and theft.

“Do you think the slave pens are on the other side of the mushroom field?” Zaltys whispered.

Julen shrugged. “Makes as much sense as anything else. I doubt they're in that palace or university or bathhouse or whatever that building is.”

“Probably where the Slime King lives,” Zaltys said. “So keep it in mind if we need to try that diplomatic option. If we circle around the settlement and come back to the fields on the other side—”

Suddenly the sphere of blue-green light in the central courtyard began to twist and writhe, tentacles of eye-wrenching color lashing out as the whole thing roiled. A high-pitched whine filled the air, and all the derro passing by stopped and stared at the light. Julen exchanged a glance with Zaltys. “What—” he began, but then went silent.

Something emerged from the ball of light. The creature was larger than the portal through which it arrived—Julen’s eyes watered trying to make sense of that fact—and the thing was rather spherical itself, with small eyes bobbing on long stalklike appendages, most of its face taken up by a single, much larger, eye above a vast mouth full of long and pointed teeth. A crowd of derro converged on it from all sides, and two or three fell as shimmering rays beamed from some of the creature’s eyestalks—one derro burst into flames, and one disintegrated like he was made of dust, while a third froze in place like a living statue. There were too many derro from too many directions though, and they threw opaque nets—essentially oversized black blankets, though presumably made of something stronger than ordinary cloth—over the creature, blinding it, and began dragging it down to the ground by the simple force of two-score arms pulling. Once it was down, they bundled the creature up like a sack of old clothes, then beat the sack with clubs until it stopped moving. A few of the derro tied off the ends of the nets and began dragging it up the stairs into the building Julen had begun thinking of as the Collegium, because it reminded him of the university in Delzimmer.

“What just happened?” Julen said.

Zaltys stared at him. “You’re the expert. Tell me what we saw.”

Julen shook his head. “I think that, that floating eye thing, was a beholder.”

Zaltys took in a hiss of air through clenched teeth. “Even *I’ve* heard of those. Eye-tyrants. Supposed to be some of the most fearsome monsters in the world, and these derro brought it down like it was a routine occurrence.”

“Maybe it is,” Julen said, looking around the cavern with growing horror. “It came out of that bobbing ball of light. What if it’s not just a magical lamp? Derro can see quite well in the dark, and most of their slaves can too, so what would they want with lights in their town? What if the light is sort of a *side* effect—”

“They’re portals,” Zaltys said, which rather spoiled Julen’s plans for a grand reveal of that speculation, but he nodded.

“Not wide-open portals, I’d guess, or we’d see more traffic streaming through them, but at least places where portals sometimes open. But portals to *where*?”

“The Far Realm,” said a voice behind them.

Stupid, not to set a guard, Julen thought. But if it’s just one of them, maybe we can ...

He and Zaltys turned. There was just one derro standing before them, smiling—it was an incongruous expression on such a hideous face—and wearing a robe covered in what appeared to be living, blinking eyes of various hues. Zaltys thought the derro was female, though she didn’t look noticeably different from the males—a trifle shorter, perhaps, but mostly the difference was in the higher pitch of the voice. The derro woman wasn’t even armed, unless the obviously magical robe counted as a weapon. But there were another dozen derro arrayed a dozen steps behind her, holding their wicked little hand crossbows, some of them muttering to themselves, others bouncing on the balls of their feet, and one scratching his chin with the barbed point of the bolt in his loaded weapon. They looked the sort to shoot on a whim and not bother to ask any questions later.

“Our spells aren’t perfect yet,” the smiling derro said. “We’ve managed to create pockets of potential in which semistable portals

to the Far Realm sometimes form, and many of us have developed the ability to open what might best be termed *windows* to the Far Realm, through which the mind-altering wonders of that place may be glimpsed—it's instructive for our study, and useful as a weapon, since such glimpses of the Far Realm tend to drive the uninitiated mad, at least temporarily. Long enough to club them over the head and chop off their arms and legs, anyway. Would you like to see? No? Very well. Then if you don't think we should drive you mad and experiment on you, what *should* we do with you instead? Armed invaders don't often make it this close to our settlement, and I'm curious why you've come."

Julen was fairly certain that was a trick question, so he was glad when Zaltys spoke up, because it meant he didn't have to. "We are emissaries from the surface, with a proposal for the Slime King."

The derro in the back began to murmur among themselves, the points of their crossbows wavering but not entirely moving aside—shifted enough that their shots would probably maim rather than kill, which was small comfort.

The smiling derro took no notice. "I am a savant of the People, sometimes called the Slime Clan by the lesser races, and I am in personal service to the Slime King. You may give me any message to pass on. I'm sure by the time I have an answer for you you'll still be alive, though possibly not in exactly the same body you started out in."

"The message is to be delivered personally," Zaltys said firmly. "Or we'll simply leave, and your king won't ever know what we have to offer."

"Leave? No, no, that's not likely."

"Wait here, Julen, while I show them what we can do," Zaltys said, and faded from sight like a shadow disappearing in the sun.

Wait here, Julen thought. Like I have any choice. It was a bold bluff, no mistaking. He was sure his admiration for his cousin's bravery would be a great comfort to him if he died.

Zaltys reappeared a moment later on top of one of the spindly towers nearby, bow drawn, arrow unmistakably pointed at the savant, who'd finally stopped smiling. "This is a good sniper position," Zaltys said. "If you had any sense, you'd have bowmen of your own posted here."

"Yes, fine," the savant said. "You can make yourself very nearly invisible in dim light. We're all very impressed. But didn't you notice my robe is covered with eyes? I can see invisible things, girl, which might hamper your escape."

"Oh," Zaltys said, nonplussed but quickly recovering. "Not if I put an arrow through your eye, it wouldn't."

"A point," the savant said. "Now come down from there. Don't make me open a portal and drive you mad. Playing with your food is slightly less fun if the food's too mentally distressed to realize it's being eaten. I'll take you to the Slime King. There may even be a reward in it for me, like getting to watch you be consumed by something with more eyes than tentacles and more tentacles than teeth. Asking to meet with the Slime King is like a fish asking to be hooked and gutted and worn like a hat."

"You wear gutted fish like hats?" Julen asked.

"Only on Fish Day," the savant said impatiently. "Now come down from there, archer."

Zaltys faded from sight again, and reappeared beside Julen. Most of the guards wandered off when it became apparent there would be no immediate killing, but a couple of others trailed along as the savant led them toward the Collegium—including one with glowing green smears in his beard.

"I know you," Julen said.

"Me too," Zaltys said. "I tied you up and left you by a waterfall. No hard feelings?"

The derro grunted and said something in a strange language. The other guard said, "He's taken a vow of incomprehensibility. He

speaks Deep Speech to those who speak Common, Dwarvish to those who speak Elvish, like that.”

“But he spoke to me in my own language earlier,” Zaltys said.

The guard shook his head. “Impossible. Must have been someone else. We derro are nothing if not rigorously consistent.”

“So what did he say just now?” Julen asked.

The derro shrugged. “I respect his vow, so I choose not to understand him.”

“Oh.” Julen thought for a moment. “What’s Fish Day?”

“No idea,” the derro said. “Never heard of it. Savants are all lunatics if you ask me. So. Be honest. Are you the agents of Zhentarim here to kill the Slime King and allow me to ascend to the throne?”

“No,” Zaltys said carefully. “That’s not us.”

“Ah well. They’ll be along soon enough I’m sure. My sister’s skull, I keep it in my sleep-hole, it told me my time of glory is nearly here, and I just need to bide my time, so that’s me, here I am, I’m biding.”

Bug-eater said something and laughed.

“Truer words were never spoken,” the other derro said, and wandered off just as they reached the broad stone steps. The derro who’d been murdered in front of the Collegium earlier was completely naked, his clothes all stolen, and another derro in a filthy white apron crouched by his head and methodically shaved off his hair with a rust-speckled straight razor.

The inmates are running the asylum, Julen thought.

“The Slime King is quite deep in the chambers below,” the savant said, pausing between two massive pillars. “I can’t be responsible if you’re killed by anything along the way. Are you sure you don’t want to tell me your message?”

Zaltys shook her head.

The savant sighed. "Fine, then. Let's go."

Bug-eater said something that sounded as if it were meant to be reassuring, but followed up by pointing his crossbow at them meaningfully, so Zaltys and Julen went after the savant. "Welcome to the center of derro innovation and magical science," she said. "Mind your step. Some of the puddles down here will melt your feet off and feast on the slurry left behind."

Julen glanced down, instinctively looking for such deadly puddles, and noticed the pale snake was still with them, slithering along unnoticed in their wake. Definitely something strange going on there, but compared to the mysteries and oddities he'd encountered in recent days, it barely rated a mention.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

WE'RE FOLLOWING A SNAKE," ALAIA SAID. "AND AS FAR as I can tell, it's *just* a snake. I'm fairly well attuned to the primal whispers of the natural world, and they tell me: ordinary cave snake, lives on bugs and rodents, no particular intelligence."

"And yet, you'd think a normal cave snake would want to avoid a heavily-armed dragonborn instead of behaving like a frisky kitten." Krailash's head moved in a constant side-to-side sweep, his senses alert for the possibility of ambush, with Alaia holding the sunrod aloft. They were back on the Causeway, a broad avenue of blood-smeared stone smashing straight as an arrow shaft through caverns large and small. The snake led them along at a steady but not punishing pace, and Alaia's spirit boar acted as their forward scout.

"I doubt that snake's afraid of us," Alaia said. "If it lives down here it's dodged significantly worse things. It's probably just leading us to its favorite mouse hole."

"I doubt that. A god set it on this path." Krailash skirted one of the smears of dried blood.

"So you said. I believe in the gods, of course, but I've never had much use for them. I revere the wild, and the wild was here before most of the gods, and it will outlast them. It's hard to imagine a god taking any interest in *our* situation, though, especially one as unpleasant as you describe."

"You've never doubted one of my reports in the thirty years we've been together," Krailash said mildly. "Is there a reason you doubt me now?"

She scowled. "All right. I believe you saw what you say you saw." He started to object, and she held up her hand. "And I suppose I

believe your interpretation of what you saw too. A god. A god who made a body out of *snakes*, who takes an interest in Zaltys, who loves secrets and whispers ... I find the idea rather troubling. I don't want to believe it. The implications are too disturbing. I want to believe you were deceived by some trickster creature, some lying Underdark denizen, a larva mage or a drow illusionist or something."

"Not impossible," Krailash said. "But we're lost in the Underdark, and the snake, at least, gives us something to follow."

"Last time we followed something down here it led us into a trap," she grumbled.

The snake slithered toward the jagged opening of a tunnel leading off the Causeway. "A change of direction," Krailash said. "A hopeful sign."

"Mark my words, we'll find nothing but a nest of newborn rats. Which might make a nice change from these trail rations. You could break your teeth on them."

"Perhaps *you* could, but my teeth are of altogether stronger stuff."

They stepped into a cavern spotted with blood, the floor scattered with bits of shredded flesh. Predators and prey of the Underdark had clashed there, and recently, but there was no sign of any living monsters.

Or so he thought at first. Something fluttered near the ceiling, and Krailash squinted upward, fearing they'd stumbled upon another swordwing. He'd expected the Underdark to be full of things that crawled and oozed and slithered; the presence of things that *flew* was even worse. But whatever the creature was, it wasn't the size of a swordwing, and seemed more like a bobbing balloon with trailing tentacles.

Grell. The derro who'd led them to the swordwing hive had mentioned such things: blind floating hunters bearing barbed tentacles. Krailash was a melee fighter, but he would have given

much for a javelin or a bow or even a sling; the creature was beyond the range of his axe, even if he made a great leap. He exhaled his icy breath upward, hoping to stun the creature and make it fall to the ground, where he could make short work of it with Thunder's Edge. But the creature floated aside with surprising agility, and Krailash's breath just limned a few stalactites in frost.

"Krailash, what—" Alaia said, but then a great pain burst in his head, and black flowers blossomed in his vision, and he fell to his knees. His mouth filled with the taste of copper and rotten meat, and Alaia was shouting but he couldn't answer, he couldn't understand, there was something in his *mind*—

He stood up, though not because he willed it. His vision took on a reddish tinge. The grell is controlling me, he thought, terrified, as he raised his axe. He tried to fling the weapon away, but the effort was futile. Gods, the horrors of the Underdark were unending. He tried to tell Alaia to run. Even with her powers, he might be able to strike her down, especially because she was looking at him with concern, asking if he was all right. She hadn't noticed the grell floating high in the cavern like a puppetmaster pulling Krailash's strings. If she didn't try to defend herself, he could split her in two with one blow of Thunder's Edge, and what greater horror could there be for one such as himself, who held honor sacred above all else? To murder the woman he'd spent the past three decades trying to protect?

Krailash raised his axe high.



"This is the center of derro learning and civilization," the savant said, "So it goes without saying, it is the most learned and civilized place in the world."

Bug-eater said something cheerful and began pointing to various objects, grunting as he gestured: the world's worst tour guide.

Zaltys didn't spend much time in museums back home; she preferred exploring ruins in the wild to seeing fragments of ruins

neatly brushed clean and mounted in glass display cases. She'd only been to Delzimmer's centers of art and history once or twice, and this place was similar, though there was usually less blood on the floor of the museums back home. Beyond the pillars of the front steps was a wide, open area punctuated by low stone display pedestals, holding an astonishing array of strange bric-a-brac, with derro savants in robes strolling around, peering at the exhibits, and scratching on wax tablets with styluses. The savant bustled them along fairly rapidly, so Zaltys couldn't look at any of the exhibits too closely, which was probably a blessing.

They passed a messy pile of gems, with clods of earth clinging to their shining facets; a scale replica of the Collegium itself made entirely of neatly stacked and balanced coins—probably looted from surface-world slaves, and worthless as currency there; and a petrified dragon's egg as big as a derro, with various incomprehensible signs and sigils scratched into its surface—either mystical writing or graffiti, Zaltys wasn't sure.

But the most striking exhibits were the exemplars of various Underdark races, taxidermied specimens dressed in the bloody remnants of their own armor (if they were races that wore clothes) and standing in lifelike—and usually warlike—poses on their pedestals. They passed a kuo-toa clutching its harpoon, and one of the jellyfish things Julen had called grell dangled from the ceiling on wires. Julen murmured the names of the ones she didn't recognize: A bullywug leaning on its spear. A myconid with its helmetlike mushroom-cap head, holding a club of gnarled, hardened fungus. A swordwing with one of its arms and one of its wings missing. A beholder, not resting on a pedestal but jammed on top of a pointed stick, so from a distance it appeared to float, its eyestalks drooping and blind. An illithid, its long brown robes rather charred, its horrible mouth-tentacles singed as well. Something even Julen didn't recognize, a humanoid figure with its skin flayed away, bits of armor fused directly to its exposed muscles, holding a whip made of linked spinal vertebrae, the jutting bone spurs sharpened to spikes.

As they passed that one, Zaltys saw its eyes move in its immobilized face, tracking her, and she realized it wasn't dead and stuffed but somehow alive and petrified, frozen in stasis by magic and made into a living statue. Zaltys shuddered. The creature was horrifying, yes, but no monster deserved a fate like *that*. How many of the other exhibits had been alive too, and she simply hadn't noticed? What kind of creatures could create a museum like this?

Zaltys had come into the Underdark to rescue any of her family that survived. That remained her mission. But if possible, she would also flush the derro out of the bowels of the earth as well.

"From this angle you can see the face of the aboleth," the savant said, and pointed up.

Zaltys and Julen tilted their heads back. Julen gasped, and Zaltys let out a low whistle. An eel-like shape, thirty feet long and dangling tentacles and whiskers and shredded fins, was suspended from the ceiling by metal chains, and from their position, near the back of the central chamber, they could indeed see its face if one could call it a face, with those vertically-aligned, dead eyes, that lip-less mouth, those whiskers the thickness of a man's leg.

"An aboleth," Julen said. "They're supposed to be the most fearsome creatures in all of the Underdark."

"Nonsense," the derro savant said briskly. "You're thinking of the derro. Though that particular aboleth was a sort of *honorary* derro for a while—it used to be Slime King."

Julen glanced at Zaltys, licked his lips, and said, "Is the current Slime King also an aboleth?"

"The Slime King is derro," the derro said. "By *definition*. The highest of the high of the Slime Clan, who are the best of all the derro, just as the derro themselves are the best of all the races."

Zaltys pointed to the thing hanging from the ceiling. "When that creature up there was Slime King, was it derro? By definition?"

“That’s what I just *said*,” the savant said, scowling, and the eyes on her robe began to blink furiously. “Why can’t you *listen*?” She jerked around on her heel and stalked off toward a doorway at the back of the Collegium, and Zaltys and Julen followed, because what else could they do? If they tried to leave, they might be allowed to walk right out, but more likely they’d be killed, or frozen and perched on pedestals. Bug-eater was still trailing along behind them, still aiming his crossbow generally in their direction, so cooperation seemed the wisest course.

The savant led them to a stone stairway that spiraled down for a few dozen feet before ending in another doorway. A wide hallway lined with open doors extended straight as a ruler before disappearing into gloom. There were lights down there, in the form of flickering smokeless torches set at irregular intervals, but they cast only small pools of light. “Straight down the end of the hallway,” the savant said. “And mind you don’t stray into the side rooms. They are sovereign microkingdoms, each populated and ruled by a single derro doing particularly interesting experiments, and if you pass over their thresholds you are subject to their absolute rule, which means, in practice, that horrible things would happen to you. As long as you stay here in the hallway, which is subject to the Slime King’s rule ... Well, horrible things will probably still happen to you, but not as quickly.”

Zaltys couldn’t resist looking into the first few doorways they passed. What would a “sovereign microkingdom” of the derro look like? The first just had a naked derro, body covered in a calligraphy of scars, snoring on a pile of inexpertly-skinned pelts, flies buzzing around him. In the next, a robed derro sat at a work table, furiously sketching on pieces of thin hide with a chunk of charcoal grasped in his fist, and he would have looked like any scholar anywhere if not for the fact that one of his arms was missing, replaced by a long, ropy tentacle that lashed and twitched and writhed seemingly of its own accord.

The third chamber was the one that made Zaltys turn her face resolutely forward, focused only on the hallway in front of her, all curiosity burned out of her. A derro in a blood-stained apron worked in that room, a pair of long metal tables set up in the center of his sovereign space. On one table lay the partially-dissected body of a beholder, perhaps the same one they'd seen captured in the square earlier, and the derro surgeon was snipping off its eyestalks with a pair of large shears. On the other table lay the body of a hairy humanoid figure—perhaps a quaggoth?—also partly taken to pieces. But the dead quaggoth had beholder eyestalks attached to its head, and the stalks were *moving*, waving lazily like underwater plants undulating in the current, and when one of the eyes looked at Zaltys as she passed, she could tell it was horribly *aware*.

Zaltys couldn't imagine seeing anything more disturbing—until, abruptly, she did. Just be glad you didn't see a human on the table, Zaltys thought. It could have been one of your kin. Unless they were all killed long ago.

The hallway finally ended in another doorway, and another stairway spiraling down. The savant seemed to notice Bug-eater for the first time. “Do *you* want to go down there too?”

Bug-eater shook his head firmly, bowed rather elaborately to Julen and Zaltys, and strolled away—not down the hallway, but into one of the open doors of the side rooms. Screams immediately emerged from the room, though whether they were Bug-eater's screams or the screams of the sovereign derro inside or the screams of some other entity entirely, Zaltys didn't know. The savant took no notice, leading them down the stairs.

“We could take her,” Julen whispered to her. “They never even bothered disarming us.”

Zaltys nodded. “I'm not sure killing her does us any good, though.”

“True. But I don't mind telling you, Cousin, I'm pleased to have the option.”

The option didn't last long. At the base of the stairs they found a solid wooden door reinforced with iron bars—the first closed door they'd seen in the Collegium—guarded by two hulking humanoids armed with short swords. It took Zaltys a moment to realize they were derro, since they were taller than she was and almost as broad across the shoulders as Krailash, but they had the spiky white derro hair and the long faces and pointed chins Zaltys had grown all too accustomed to seeing. The distinctive derro eyes were hidden by blindfolds made of strips of dark cloth. Zaltys wondered what they were—experimental subjects made more strong by the dark arts of derro surgeons? Merely derro heads attached to the bodies of larger humanoids? And why the blindfolds?

The last question was answered quickly. The savant drew a long needle from the sleeve of her robe. The eyes all over her garment stopped blinking, and stared at Zaltys and Julen fixedly. “Now then,” the savant said. “You're almost ready to meet the Slime King. I just need to remove your eyes first.” She stepped toward them, needle glittering.



The grell philosopher was full to bursting from eating his dead, and he'd hidden away the bits of their flesh he couldn't devour yet to keep them safe from other predators, but these two were too delicious to pass up. A scaly thing and a hairy thing, and he was under no orders from an interloper god or a mob of derro scum to give *these* two safe passage. (There were other things in the cavern, a snuffling thing of smoke and a small snake, but he was interested in the meatier specimens.) The scaly thing was big and strong and the hairy one was small and weak. Use the big one to kill the little one, for a start. That was elegant. The philosopher valued elegance.



This is no way to wield such a fine weapon, Krailash thought. The grell that possessed him forced him to lift the axe up over his head, which was entirely the wrong way to use such an axe—he was killing a person here, not splitting a length of wood for the

fireplace. It was no surprise that a floating, tentacled brain would lack proper martial technique, but it was an additional dishonor to be used as a tool by something so incompetent. Not that his poor form would save Alaia's life: she would be split by the axe, if not as neatly as a length of wood might have been.

The worst part was, Krailash couldn't even close his eyes as his arms began to drive the axe down.

But his poor form provided enough warning for Alaia to react. She dived aside, and the blow fell half a foot from her, the blade of the axe ringing loudly on the hard stone floor. Krailash staggered with the swing, the weight of the axe pulling him off balance and making him fall to the floor. Alaia's spirit companion rushed toward him, head lowered, snorting and pawing at the stone—but it didn't attack, merely stood guard. Krailash's body tried to stand, but the grell was a creature of many limbs and weightless flight, and seemed to have some difficulty maneuvering Krailash's mere two arms and legs and his great weight.

Alaia, meanwhile, was scanning the cavern, and she said, "Ah ha," quietly, looking up. Her spirit companion lifted its head too, and snorted mildly. Motes of white fire emerged from its nostrils, floating up, and a blazing light ignited near the upper reaches of the cavern. The burning grell lashed its tentacles wildly, then dropped with a heavy wet *thud* to the cavern floor. It writhed, and tried to crawl away, and Krailash heard a great, drawn-out screech—though he soon realized the scream was echoing only in his mind, not in his ears. He regained control of his limbs, and stood up, unsteadily, then prodded at the corpse of the burning grell with the handle of his axe. "Foul thing," he said, spitting, as if he could spit out the flavor of the creature's mind in his own. "Took control of me, used me the way I'd wield a sword, but less skillfully."

"An aberration." Alaia's voice was thick with disgust. "Say what you will about the derro—they are horrible creatures, but they belong in this world. But things like *that* come from elsewhere, and their very existence poisons reality and sickens nature. They are a tumor in the

body of the world, everything shamans and druids stand against. Just as cancer turns healthy flesh into sickness, so these aberrations seek to turn the natural world into a reflection of their own mad homeland.” She hugged herself. “And these caverns are full of such things, I’m sure. Would that we could burn them all.”

“We may have the chance to burn a few more,” Krailash said. “But we should keep looking for Zaltys, if we can.” He looked around. “Where is the snake?”

Alaia frowned. “It must have slithered away during the fight.”

Krailash swore. “Lost without a guide, then, if it even *was* a guide. Following it was something, at least, it gave us the illusion of progress. But now ...”

“Don’t lose heart.” Alaia’s tone was more order than reassurance. “Zaltys is depending on us.”

He shook his head. “I’m merely assessing our situation. We—”

“Look.” Alaia pointed at the floor of the tunnel that intersected theirs up ahead. “On the ground. Is that a chalk mark?”

Krailash investigated, kneeling, and attempting to smudge the faintly glowing blue smear without success. “Magical chalk. Haven’t seen that in years—we used to mark our paths with it when we went on dungeon delves.” He glanced up and down the tunnel. “There’s another. In fact, there are marks in both directions. Did Julen have chalk like that?”

She shrugged, but when she spoke, her voice held a trace of excitement. “I don’t know, but it seems like something the Guardians might use, doesn’t it?”

“The snake may have taken us just far enough then,” Krailash said. “Which way do we go in the tunnel?”

The dire boar spirit companion went snuffling into the corridor in one direction, then came back and traveled down the other. When it

returned, it stared at Alaia for a moment, and she nodded. “We go right, Krailash.”

“Why’s that?”

“Because it’s the direction that moves *down*.”

“A sound basis for choice,” he said.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

NO,” ZALTYS SAID. “WE WANT TO *SEE* THE SLIME KING, and we can’t very well see him if you take out our eyes.”

The savant bared her teeth. “No one *sees* the king while the king is the king—only after, if we put the king on display in the Hall of Glorious Victories, if there’s anything left to display. You can pass on your so-very-important, so-very-secret message just fine with no eyes. It only hurts a moment.” While she spoke, the needle moved, weaving a glittering pattern before them.

Zaltys leveled her looted repeating crossbow at the savant’s belly. “We like our eyes. I like my eyes rather more than I like your life. Put the needle away, and let the Slime King know we’re here. We can talk to him while he hides behind a screen, or in a dark room—there are easier ways than putting our eyes out, you know.”

“Nothing easier. Poke, poke, poke, poke. And all done. Far easier than dousing torches or putting up a screen.”

“We could wear blindfolds, I suppose, like these guards do.”

The savant shook her head. “They wear cloth to cover their eyes, which have been poked out, and the cloth soaks up the oozing things that ooze out of the holes. *Very* basic, *very* traditional.” The savant seemed to take notice of her crossbow for the first time, and frowned. “They didn’t take your weapons away upstairs? Useless guards.”

Zaltys glanced at the derro by the door, but they might as well have been on another continent for all the attention they paid the exchange. “That surprised me too,” she said. “We don’t mean your Slime King any harm, but I’d think you’d worry more about assassins.”

The guards flanking the door began to chuckle, as if they shared one voice—or at least one sense of humor. “Ha,” the savant said, speaking the word rather than actually laughing. “If you lot can assassinate the Slime King, then our king *deserves* to be assassinated. The king can take care of himself.” She turned to the guards. “Tell the king there are visitors here, emissaries from the surface world, and that they don’t want to be blinded.”

One of the guards shrugged and knocked once on the door. A panel slid open in the door, and the guard murmured through the hole to another blindfolded face inside. Then the panel slid shut.

Zaltys wasn’t sure if she still needed to be aiming the crossbow at the savant. She still had her needle out. Julen had sauntered over a few feet and was standing in a casual-looking way, but Zaltys could tell by the way his feet were set that he was prepared to whip out his throwing knives and let loose if it appeared necessary.

The panel on the door slid open again. The guard inside murmured to a guard outside, and he took a step forward. “The Slime King will see you. And consents to be seen.”

“This is outrageous,” the savant said, froth forming at the corners of her mouth, her whole body vibrating—except for the long needle, which she held perfectly still and steady. “*I’ve* never been allowed to see the Slime King, and I’m the Minister of Seeing Things, I’ve never even gotten through the *door*, and now these *humans* from the surface world think they can—”

“The Slime King has spoken,” the guard said, and clouted the savant on the side of the head. The smaller derro dropped her needle and then followed it, falling to the floor. All the eyes on her robe closed too. Zaltys couldn’t tell if she was unconscious or dead. A thin trickle of blood ran from the fallen savant’s ear.

“Enter,” the guard said, and the door swung open.

Zaltys looked at Julen, who shrugged. They went through the doorway, followed by their little snake companion, into another huge chamber, one dominated by a giant, almost perfectly round

pool of water. Torches on long poles around the pool made reflections on the water and filled the room with shadows. On the far side of the pool, looking quite incongruous in that vast open expanse of stone, were the furnishings of a house: a bed, a desk with a chair, a low couch, a long dining table, a wooden wardrobe, and other pieces of furniture. A humanoid figure sat at the desk, back to the door, head bent, apparently working.

“Go on, then,” said one of the two guards inside the door. “The king awaits.”

Zaltys and Julen stepped tentatively forward. The ceiling there was high, and every footstep on the neatly-swept stone floor rang and echoed. They skirted wide around the pool—Zaltys noted that it was easily large enough to hold an aboleth, and wondered if the Slime King lurked below. Perhaps the more human figure on the far side was merely a secretary or translator.

But nothing broke the surface of the pool, so they continued around it, to the little pocket of normality formed by the arrangement of tables and lamps and chairs. They went around to the other side of the desk, and faced the person working there.

It was a small human woman wearing a simple housedress, peering at a sheet of parchment with her nose very close to the paper. The woman was quite old, the dark skin of her hands thin and wrinkled, her hair as white as a derro’s but much more fine, pulled back in a bun on top of her head. After a moment she looked up from the paper. “Ah. The emissaries from the surface world. I’ve been following your progress. It’s remarkable you made it this—” She broke off abruptly and stared at Zaltys. “Extraordinary,” she murmured, and tilted her head, gazing at Zaltys’s face as if checking her own appearance in a mirror.

Zaltys wasn’t sure what to say. Of all the things she’d expected to find when she entered the chamber of the Slime King, a rather grandmotherly old woman was not one of them.

“Are you ... the Slime King?” Julen said.

The woman glanced at him, inclined her head, then went back to staring at Zaltys.

“It’s only that ... forgive me,” Julen stammered. “From the name, I supposed ...”

With obvious effort, she tore her gaze from Zaltys and looked at Julen. “You expected something different. Fair enough. It’s just a title, really. I’m sure the original Slime King was both male and slimy, but not all of them have been. There was an aboleth once ... and a mind flayer—that didn’t end well, he’s displayed upstairs. In fact, they both are. And for a while, I understand, the Slime King was actually just the corpse of a grell philosopher. That king is generally ranked as one of the four or five best in the clan’s history. He was supposed to have been very contemplative. Anyway, it hardly made anything *worse*. But I’ve been the Slime King for some time now.” She looked back at Zaltys. “Tell me, young lady. Where are you from?”

“Delzimmer.”

The Slime King shook her head. “Not originally. Not with that coloring. The Delzimmer folk are paler by far, and the shape of your face ... Where do your *people* hail from?”

“That’s kind of why we’re here—” Julen began. “*Silence*, human,” the Slime King hissed. Then she looked back at Zaltys and said sweetly, “Do you know, dear? Where your people come from?”

“The jungle,” Zaltys said. “My village was taken by slavers when I was a baby. I was the only one left behind.”

The Slime King sat back in her chair and laced her hands across her stomach. “I thought so,” she said. “Your face—it looks almost like mine did, when I was your age. It’s lovely to see you, child. Family is so important.”

“What are you talking about?” Zaltys said.

“My name is Iraska,” the Slime King said. “And I’m either your great-great-grandmother or your great-great-aunt.” She smiled,

showing her teeth for the first time, and her canines were long and curved, like the fangs of a serpent.



Things in camp were going badly. Having the big boss, her daughter, the head of security, and half a dozen of the most dedicated guards leave unexpectedly tended to lead to a certain amount of shirking, lollygagging, malingering, and—even for those who weren’t actively lazy—general confusion and delay.

Worst of all, Glory had to let people *see* her, and remember her, and try to convince them that she was, in fact, qualified to give them orders. The morning after everyone else went underground, she stood in the center of camp on an improvised platform made of stacked crates and cleared her throat. The workers having their breakfast didn’t pay her any mind, and she realized she was still—automatically—blurring herself out of their mental vision. So she’d made herself visible, startling a few people nearby, and cleared her throat again. “Hello. Everyone. My name is Glory. I’m, ah, part of the camp leadership. Alaia and Krailash are off on an important errand, so they’ve put me in charge, and—”

“We’ve never seen you before!” one of the cooks shouted, the outburst followed by general muttering, including some, unfortunately, from armed men eating their breakfasts alongside the laborers.

“I keep to myself,” Glory said. “But I’m here now, so if there are any problems, you can bring them to me. Otherwise things should just proceed as—”

“She’s a tiefling,” a guard said. “You can’t trust them. She’s practically a devil. Probably sent from some cult of Asmodeus out in the jungle to seduce us all to destruction.” He sounded somewhat hopeful on that last point, and Glory wished she’d worn something a little less revealing. She wasn’t used to worrying about that sort of thing. She could sense the mood of the crowd, and while they weren’t about to attack her with pikes and torches, they also

weren't taking her leadership seriously. Not that she wanted to be a leader *anyway*.

Then Quelamia mounted the platform next to her, resplendent in her gold and green robes, holding a staff of living wood, her otherworldly eyes seeming to look at every face in the crowd at once. "You all know me," she said, her voice loud and clear and carrying, though she didn't particularly seem to be raising her voice. "I am the senior wizard of the Traveling Serrats, and I have sheltered you from storms, slain your enemies, and punished your transgressions, as your leader Alaia variously willed. I say to you now: this tiefling has been granted the authority to rule the caravan during Alaia's absence. Her voice is the voice of the family, and to disobey her is to disobey the family, with all the dire consequences that implies. Do you all understand?"

The crowd shouted affirmation, and Quelamia nodded to those assembled, nodded rather more curtly to Glory, and descended the platform again, going about her business.

"Okay then," Glory said. "As I was saying, if you have any concerns, you can come to me, otherwise just go about your jobs. You all know what to do."

Before she could come down off the platform, people began shouting at her. The cooks complained that the hunting parties weren't bringing back enough fresh meat. The hunters complained that half the barrels of arrows brought from the city were junk, shafts made of green wood and fletched with duck feathers, which was apparently an outrage. The interim guard captain, appointed by Krailash, had some question about guard rotations, which Glory couldn't even begin to comprehend. The laborers wanted to know if they should go back to the same terazul vines they'd been harvesting yesterday, or move over to a more promising patch on the other side of some particular ruins, with the caveat that if they were supposed to go there, they'd need more guards, not to mention some men to go in and clear out some kind of poisonous bush first. The scouts wanted to know if they should take men to

destroy a troop of guardian apes they'd noticed, though they were about half a mile outside the official perimeter, just in case the apes came over to make trouble later. The guard who'd worried she was here to seduce them all wanted to know why he hadn't seen her around camp before and let her know he had a flask of some fine liquor if she was looking to unwind. And, and, and ...

Glory began to rub her temples as a headache started to throb. How did Alaia deal with this? There didn't seem to be people pounding on her door all the time. Probably Krailash handled a lot of it, and many of these people probably took care of their own damn problems rather than bother the supreme boss, but as far as they were concerned Glory was just a hireling like them, not Family, and thus, not untouchable.

Eventually Glory got them to form an orderly line and ask their questions one at a time, and then she just looked inside their minds to see what *they* thought the best decision would be, and then simply agreed with those, for the most part—she'd learned long ago that at least half the people who ask questions really just want confirmation that their inclinations are the right way to go.

The guard who wanted to share his liquor was told to come to her wagon after sunset, because even if he was an idiot and a bigot, he had lovely biceps, and she could always make him forget he'd even talked to her afterward. Mind-controlling someone into wanting physical intimacy was a monstrous crime, but wiping the mind of an attractive moron after some consensual fun was just sensible relationship management. Her power had spared her a lot of bad consequences from ill-advised one-night frolics. Shame it wasn't sparing her from her first horrible foray into leadership.



“It’s hard bossing people around when you don’t want them to know you exist,” Glory complained, dropping into a chair in Alaia’s trailer. The eladrin wizard Quelamia was there, apparently staring at nothing, which probably meant she was doing very important mental work. Glory had never peeked into Quelamia’s mind—

wizards were touchy about their secrets, and the fey were hard to read anyway, and okay, Glory *had* tried once, and Quelamia had some formidable psychic barriers—but she wondered, sometimes, what it was like inside that cool and aloof head. Green and tranquil, quite unlike Glory’s own fiery red and char black thoughts? “Feel free to, you know, jump in and tell people what to do out there in camp any time. I’m not cut out for managing people. At least, not *that* way. Making people do stuff is one thing. *Telling* them to do things is a whole different proposition. I don’t like it.”

“Do you believe in evil?” Quelamia said. She didn’t look at Glory, but the psion decided to assume the question was meant for her.

She pointed to her horns. “I’m a tiefling. I’ve got evil in my ancestry. Of course I believe in it. Is this about Zaltys again?”

“But many call their enemies evil,” Quelamia said, “even if they are not so different from themselves. Some would call the Serrats evil. The effects of terazul are often terrible, and without the family’s trade, that poison would be far less widespread. And how many evil creatures consider themselves evil? There are some, certainly—degenerate races and dark gods and undead wizards and ancient dragons that revel in cruelty, but I’m sure many of them don’t actually consider themselves evil so much as superior. More important than anyone else, and willing to do terrible things to further their own interests, no more concerned about the deaths they’d cause than Krailash worries about stepping on ants. Some of those creatures are simply mad. Is *madness* the same as evil? Are the evil, by definition, also mad? Even when they seem cold, calculating, and sane?”

“Believing you’re more important—more real—than everyone else,” Glory said. “And acting on that belief. That’s a pretty good working definition of evil.”

“Then most thinking creatures are evil, at least sometimes.” Quelamia finally looked at her. “Most beings are selfish. True altruism is the province of rare holy ones.”

“Or the mad,” Glory offered. “There’s a thin line between holy and crazy just like there’s a thin line between evil and crazy.”

“Another question, then. A simpler one: Is it evil to commit evil acts in pursuit of good? Betrayal, murder, lies—are these still crimes if they’re done for a just cause, and if that cause is won?”

“Pretty much every king in the world would say no. Sometimes you have to commit horrors to prevent worse horrors. Every war that’s ever been called a just war operated on those terms.” Glory yawned. Working for a living was exhausting, and she definitely counted managing as working. “Why the philosophical musings?”

“Perhaps the only real evil is that of aberrations,” Quelamia said. “Outsiders from other realms—the *Far* Realm—creatures that don’t belong here, creatures who poison reality itself by their very nature. Entities which are toxic to nature and rationality and beauty and loyalty and love. Is that possible? That every other thing we call evil is simply a matter of degree, an issue of point of view? But then even aberrations may not be evil inherently—in their own world, they may be perfectly right and proper. It is only the context of their *wrongness* that makes us call them evil. Can I truly believe that?”

“You lost me,” Glory said. “My moral system is pretty much at the level of: murder, bad. Giving poor people bread, good. And do what you have to do in order to survive, because dead people don’t have the luxury of torturing themselves about whether they’re good or evil.”

“You’re right,” Quelamia said. “There’s something to be said for pragmatism.” She touched Glory’s shoulder, hand as light as a dried leaf. “We do what we must. What more can be expected of us?”

“So, is this about Zaltys? You think we should have gone into the Underdark with Alaia and Krailash? Because I have to admit, I do feel guilty about that, but I think I’d feel even more guilty about letting my brain get eaten by a mind flayer.”

“I made the right choice,” the eladrin said, rising. “I believe that. I must. And you must make peace with yourself about your own choices.” She swept out of the room like a queen taking leave of her court, and Glory had never been more tempted to try to knock down Quelamia’s mental barriers and read her thoughts.

She was a little bit afraid of what she might find out if she dared.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

ICAN'T BELIEVE YOU CONVINCED ME TO RIDE DOWN A waterfall," Alaia said, wringing icy water from her long hair, drops pattering the corpses of kuo-toa. "And I can't believe you were *right*."

"Going down the waterfall was the obvious path forward," Krailash said. "There were clear signs that a body had been dragged down the tunnel, and no sign of it being dragged back *out* again, so where else could it have gone? I can't be completely certain Zaltys was here." He rose from his examination of the dead fish creatures. "But these were definitely killed by arrows—not crossbow bolts, but arrows—and the only archer I know of down here is Zaltys. These broken lengths of chain on the ground are from the shackles the derro use on their slaves. I think Zaltys managed to catch up with the derro who took Julen, and saved him. I think these were his chains."

"Where do the kuo-toa come in?" Alaia said.

Krailash shrugged, the padding under his armor squelching. "Probably just a hunting party that swam through underwater tunnels and came upon Zaltys at the wrong time." He went to the edge of the still pool and peered down. He'd very nearly drowned, coming down the waterfall in plate armor, with his massive axe in his hands. The weight of arms and armor had dragged him to the bottom of the pool, and he'd had to use all his strength to climb up the rough side of the pool, underwater, and haul himself onto the dry cavern floor. He was lucky he hadn't had to unhook his armor and leave it rusting at the bottom of the pool, if it had been a little deeper, he would have. Meanwhile, Alaia's magic robe hadn't even gotten wet, water sliding off it like rain from a duck's feathers.

The water was dark, but still, and his eyesight was very good. “There’s the corpse of a derro down there,” he said. “And what looks like a burned-out sunrod. But no Julen, and no Zaltys. Which means I’m right, and they’ve continued on their journey.”

“So let’s follow in their footsteps.”

Krailash shook his head. “I have to take off my armor and try to squeeze some of the water out of the padding underneath—the weight is impossible. I’ve never wished for fire breath before, but it would be useful—some heat to dry these things out would be wonderful.”

“Perhaps I can work something out,” Alaia said.

Krailash nodded and began unbuckling his armor, letting the weight drop and groaning with the pleasure of being unencumbered. Plate armor wasn’t pleasant to wear for extended periods of time, and he was well aware that he didn’t smell as good as he might—in that respect, the dunk in icy water had done him some good. Alaia was watching him, and he grinned. “Avert your eyes, woman. Have you no modesty?”

“I’m not attracted to lizards,” she said dryly. “Your virtue is safe with me.”

When he’d stripped off his padded armor, he did his best to drape the pieces over jutting rocks to dry as Alaia instructed. She took a carved totem from her pack and began to chant in a melodic singsong, and gradually a breeze began to flow through the room, gradually increasing to a fairly steady wind that reminded Krailash poignantly of how much he missed the world above, where the movement of the air was so common he could take it completely for granted. After a while, Alaia stopped chanting, and the breeze dropped. Krailash checked his padding and grunted. “Very nearly dry. Nicely done. You should hire yourself out to propel sailboats.”

She snorted. “I’ll have you know I can summon those same winds to make even a hulking thing like you leap about in combat as deftly as a carnival acrobat. Using it to dry clothes is a bit like using your

battleaxe to dice an onion, but we work with what we have. Now get dressed. I'd become half-convinced Zaltys was dead, and hoped only to die in avenging her, but now you've given me hope that she might be alive after all."

"Indeed," Krailash said, reluctantly putting his heavy second skin back on. "Of course, as a professional soldier, I expect failure, death, and tragedy, but I begin to think another outcome is possible. Perhaps this will even end happily. We might be able to rescue whatever remnants of Zaltys's people remain enslaved and get them back to the surface. The derro are dangerous, but they won't expect us to strike in their home settlement, and their madness makes them vulnerable to superior tactics."

Alaia frowned, as if thinking intensely. "If we find any humans among the slaves," she said finally, "or for that matter dwarves, or dragonborn, or even elves, improbable as *that* seems in this region, then we should certainly do our best to rescue them. But don't expect too much. Life in the Underdark as slaves to the derro ... I don't expect there are many survivors from Zaltys's family."

Something in her tone troubled Krailash. Was she jealous of Zaltys's devotion to a family she'd never met? Troubled by her daughter's willingness to flee the family she'd grown up with to save a family she didn't even know? Alaia had taught Zaltys that nothing mattered more than family. She was just doing what she believed, all the way through herself, was right. Krailash wasn't sure she was wrong, either. You had to be devoted to *something*, or else, what was life for?

"Let's go and find out, then," he said, buckling on the last of his armor.

The water of the pool began to froth—it almost looked like it was boiling—and a large group of kuo-toa rose to the surface, clambering over the edge of the pool, armed with harpoons, eerily silent except for the sound of water dripping from their shiny,

scaled bodies. More of them began to rise to the surface, too many for Krailash to count.

Krailash groaned and lifted his great axe, weary at the thought of another pointless battle with a race he didn't even have a quarrel with.

"Enough!" Alaia shouted. "I don't have *time* for this!" She chanted, and the kuo-toa slowed down, frozen in place.

Krailash was also unable to move—or, rather, he *could* move, but he was moving very slowly, the flow of time itself rendered the consistency of cold syrup. Some figure, or force, seemed to enter the cavern, sidling around the edges of the space, something made of cold and spines and shadow and ice wind and emptiness.

"Kill one of them," Alaia said, her voice cold, her eyes black, icy vapor rising from the totem of carved bone she held in her hands. "Open a door for death, Krailash. Let death in."

Time slammed back into motion, and Krailash swung Thunder's Edge at the nearest kuo-toa, nearly severing its neckless fish head from its body. The kuo-toa nearest it screamed and fell back as if he'd struck them as well. Dark spots opened in their scaly skin, as if their flesh were rotting from within, and death moved outward in a circular wave from the point of Krailash's single strike, fish people falling and gasping, spontaneous wounds gaping in scaled flesh, as the ring of death widened. Weapons fell from slimy hands, and the kuo-toa farthest back fled from the dark magic, diving back into the water and swimming away. Something seemed to flit among the kuo-toa, a figure of shadowy presence composed of hollow spaces and rot and loss.

When the last of the kuo-toa were dead or fled, the presence receded.

Alaia dropped the totem from her hands. Her eyes remained black for a moment, only gradually clearing.

“I’ve never seen anything like that,” Krailash said, awed. “It was like ... contagious death.”

“The death spirit,” Alaia said, her voice hoarse, her hands trembling. “A powerful summoning. I wasn’t sure I could bring it, or control it once I did. It’s a dangerous thing to call upon, because it is both patient and insatiable. But well suited to this place. The primal forces in the Underdark are merciless, Krailash. And *angry*. Something down here is wrong. Unnatural. Not just the grell, or other aberrations. Something more profound, a deeper wound, a more profound threat. The natural world is twisted, and the source is not far from here.”

“Some say the derro were a great race once,” Krailash said. “That they had cities, and an empire, and lived above ground, but they dabbled with unnatural things, and brought about their own downfall. Perhaps they continue such works here in the depths?”

“Almost certainly.” Alaia sounded nearly like herself again after a drink from her canteen. She looked bleakly at the dead creatures surrounding them. “There’s a story shamans know, about the World Serpent. They say the derro opened portals to the Far Realm, a plane of madness, when the world was young. Their actions risked destroying the integrity of reality itself, and so the World Serpent, the great primal force that encircles the world, made itself manifest and dragged the cities of the derro underground, consigning them to live in the depths of the Underdark, among things almost as horrible as themselves.”

“So the World Serpent is an enemy of the derro?” Krailash said. “Then perhaps the thing I thought was a god was an emissary of—”

“No.” Alaia shook her head. “Ouroboros the World Serpent is an ancient primal spirit. It shifts its coils and the earth shakes—it doesn’t appear in a cloak and make jokes and threats and send little snakes to lead us places. That’s the sort of thing gods do, you’re right. But serpents are complicated, Krailash. They can be ancient, wise creatures. Or they can be poisonous, unexpected death in the

night. Some shamans revere the World Serpent, but there are darker forces that assume the form of snakes.”

“You mean the serpent god Zehir?” Krailash said. “But Zehir is a god of the yuan-ti, and a few mad human cultists—what would it care about Zaltys? Why would it help us find her? Why would an evil god want to make trouble for the derro, an evil race?”

Alaia opened her mouth, then closed it, and shook her head. “I don’t know. I don’t care to find out.”

“But—” Krailash said.

“Please. Let’s just go, and bring Zaltys and Julen out of this place, and hope we’re never troubled by gods or unnatural things again.” She stormed off toward the cavern’s only obvious exit, kicking the arm of a dead kuo-toa out of her path, and Krailash had to hurry to keep up.



“You’re from my village?” Zaltys said, staring at Iraska’s teeth. Her *fangs*. Had the derro experimented on her too? Given her the bite of a serpent, the way the derro savant she saw earlier had given himself a tentacle for an arm?

“I am. Well, I grew up there. I lived far away for most of my adult life.” The Slime King had stopped smiling, which was reassuring, and walked over to a low cabinet and lined up three carved wooden cups. She lifted a ceramic jug—looked like Delzimmer manufacture in the classic style, blue glazed, with a handle meant to look like a frozen stream of flowing water—and filled the cups, offering them to Zaltys and Julen.

“I don’t suppose she’d bother poisoning us,” Julen said, as if to himself, “when she has armed guards standing by.”

Iraska sipped from the cup. “Actually, once upon a time, I preferred poison over more obvious approaches to murder. I was a devotee of a certain god with a fondness for venoms and toxins and treachery.

But these days, I have other allegiances. I'd like to propose a toast." She raised her cup. "To family reunited."

Zaltys and Julen raised their cups and murmured something vaguely affirmative. The water was icy cold, almost as pure and delicious as the water that poured from Julen's magical crystal bottle.

Iraska strolled over to the edge of the pool, her back turned to them. Julen leaned in close to Zaltys and whispered fiercely, "Did you see her teeth? Do you think the derro did that to her? Do you think she *wanted* them to?"

"I don't know," Zaltys said. "I don't understand this at all."

"Don't worry," Iraska said, gazing at the still water at her feet. "I don't dip my drinking water out of the pool. It's from a private spring, very clean. *This* water ... Well, I can't confirm that aboleths shit as other creatures do, but if so, this pool must assuredly be filled with it."

"I'm sorry," Zaltys said, putting her cup down. "I'm not very good at talking in circles and implying things and letting silences speak louder than words. My mother—ah, my adopted mother—says it's a good thing I'm not part of the Traders, or I'd be demoted to swineherd, because only pigs are as tactless as I am. So I'm just going to say, I don't understand what's happening here. I came to save my people from slavers—and now I find out they're *your* people too, but you're the king of the slavers."

Iraska turned. She had moved farther from the torches, and the light reflecting off the pool of water cast her in additional flickering shadows, making her look older and younger by turns. "Did you really? Come on a mission of mercy and salvation. Whatever possessed you to do that?" There was genuine interest in her voice, but also amusement, and—Zaltys was almost sure—something like contempt. She didn't know how to respond.

Julen cleared his throat. "The people that adopted Zaltys ... We Serrats hold family sacred. We grow up knowing that nothing's more important than standing by your kin. We have our feuds, and

our rivalries, and I have aunts and uncles who haven't spoken to each other in years over slights no one can even remember, but those uncles would kill or die to defend those aunts from outside threats, and vice versa. We have a saying in the Guardians: Trust nothing, save for family." He shrugged. "Zaltys just ... carried the idea a bit farther than most of us do. If family is all-important, and some of her family is trapped underground, then she had to go and save them."

"Extraordinary," Iraska said. "I mean that."

"But if you're the leader of the derro," Zaltys said, "then it doesn't make sense that my village was taken as slaves *by* the derro, because it's your village too. Or were you not leader then? Were you taken by the derro as well, and somehow became leader later? Does that mean my family is all right? Do they live down here with you?"

"As a theory," Iraska said, "it has much to recommend it, not least of all the prospect of a bona fide happy ending. Alas, the virtues of your premise do not extend to accuracy."

"Do you mean they all died," Zaltys said, "or—"

Iraska held up her hand for silence. "Let me explain the best way I know how. It may be a trifle roundabout. I ask you to bear with me. Have you ever heard the parable of the turtle and the serpent?"

"I don't think so," Zaltys said.

"That's a shame. I shudder to think what you learned from the apes who raised you. Creatures who huddle together for warmth, suck milk from one another's bodies ..." She turned her head and spat. "This is a story everyone in your *real* family learned when they were children. A *useful* story. One day a turtle came down to a river, planning to swim across and go about his turtleish business. Now it so happened that a snake was sunning itself by the riverbank, and it too, wanted to get across the river, but it didn't know how to swim. Because it was not a water snake, but instead the sort of snake that twines itself around tree branches. So it said

to the turtle, 'You and I are much the same—indeed, we're practically cousins. Both reptiles, both cold-blooded. Why, if I had a shell and arms and legs, you and I would be almost indistinguishable in poor light. Could you do me a favor, out of family courtesy, and give me a ride across the river?'

"The turtle considered running away, for it knew snakes of this sort were lethal, but it was slow, and the snake was fast, and it was afraid if it ran it would be caught, so it said, 'I am a kindly creature, and disposed to help others, but your reputation is fearsome. How do I know that, if I let you coil upon my shell, you won't strike me dead as I'm swimming?'

" 'Simple self-preservation,' the serpent replied. 'If I kill you while you're swimming, we'll *both* die, you by biting, me by drowning.'

" 'Fair enough,' the turtle said. 'But what if you kill me when I get you to the other side?'

" 'I'm not without gratitude,' the snake replied. 'I would owe you a kindness in return for your help. And anyway, your blood is cold, and I don't eat reptiles for preference, and why would I kill you, except to eat you?'

"In truth the turtle was not greatly reassured, but the serpent seemed sincere, and running wasn't an option, so the turtle agreed, and the snake coiled up on his shell, which was almost as good as sunning on a rock, really. The turtle plunged into the water and began its slow swim across the river. When they reached the other side, the turtle said, 'Well, here we are.' And then the snake rather lazily bent down, nuzzled the exposed bit of the turtle's neck, and bit down with its fangs, pumping poison into the little reptile. The paralysis set in almost immediately, and the turtle went still as the snake slithered off its shell. Just before it died, the turtle cried out, 'Why? Why bite me? I helped you!' And the snake just replied, 'I had no choice. I can't help my nature.' " Iraska beamed at them like a schoolteacher imparting wisdom to her brightest students.

“I have heard that one,” Julen said, looking down into the contents of his cup. “But it was a frog and a spider in the version I was told. And the spider bit the frog halfway across the river, and they both died. I’m not sure I understand the point of it, the way you told it.”

Iraska ignored him, looking at Zaltys. “But I find myself wondering—what if the snake had been raised among turtles? Dressed in a shell made of wood, perhaps, with false legs glued on, so it could pass for a turtle? So it could come to *believe* it was a turtle? Would its nature be changed by its upbringing, or would its true poisonous essence make itself known on the first river crossing? Would it just thank the stupid useless weak turtle and let it go on its way?”

“I don’t feel well,” Julen said, swaying, one hand touching his forehead.

“I should hope not,” Iraska said. “The poison in the water should be having some effect by now. It doesn’t actually kill you—it brings on a sort of half-death in which you’ll be very susceptible to suggestion, which makes it perfect for mushroom-gathering slaves. Not so good for soldiers. We can’t even use drugged slaves as forlorn hopes—that’s what you call soldiers sacrificed to break through an enemy’s defense—because they move too slowly. Useful stuff, and so much crueler, and thus more satisfying, than simple death.”

“You *poisoned* him?” Zaltys said, as Julen groaned and sank to the floor, pitching over onto the stones. “But—why would you do that?”

“It’s my nature,” Iraska said, and showed her terrible fangs.

CHAPTER TWENTY

THERE'S SOMETHING ABOUT THOSE LIGHTS," ALAIA murmured, gazing at the floating clouds of blue-green haze. "They're unnatural. Just looking at them makes my teeth ache. I think they're points of access to the Far Realm." She shuddered. "Birth canals for aberrations. What are these creatures *doing* down here?"

"Foul derro magic," Krailash said. "The sooner we can find Zaltys and Julen and get away from the creatures, the happier I'll be. I thought yuan-ti were the most vile creatures in this jungle or below it, but the derro are changing my mind. We might petition the Guardians to send a substantial force to wipe out these creatures. I think we can convincingly argue they're a threat to the caravan."

Alaia nodded. "True, though the losses would be significant ... We can always hire mercenaries. The other heads of the family would curse the expense, but I don't see how I can let this go on. Whatever else I may be, I *am* still a shaman, and the Far Realm poisons everything. If I tell them the derro experiments could harm the terazul blossoms, they'll come around. Let's focus on the current situation, though."

"We should avoid the main settlement," Krailash whispered, peeking out from the inadequate concealment of a rock not far from the fungus fields and their plodding laborers. "I doubt they'd keep slaves there anyway—too smelly. More likely they'd keep them close to the place where they need to work, this mushroom forest."

"Fair enough," Alaia said. "But there's the small matter of whip-wielding derro patrolling those fields, and for all we know, the slaves might call out for guards if they see us. Engaging in a fight this close to the heart of the derro city—if you can call that

conglomeration of bone-covered mining buildings a city—seems unwise.”

“True. I don’t suppose you can create some concealment for us?”

Alaia sighed. “I couldn’t have hired a sneaking shadowy cutthroat for my head of security like the Guardians wanted, oh, no, I had to get a great unsubtle dragonborn clanking about in plate armor.”

Krailash grinned. If the stakes hadn’t been so high, he would have been enjoying himself. It was almost like adventuring again, and his blood sang with the thrill of old times restored. “I pick shifty cutthroats out of my teeth, though, so you made the right choice. Shall I just try to keep my clanking to a minimum, or do you know any tricks that can help us?”

Alaia chanted softly, and Krailash heard the words “spirit,” “moon,” and “shadow” in an old tongue, a moment before a curtain of glimmering lights and mist appeared, settling over them like dew upon morning flowers, and then vanishing from sight. “We are concealed,” Alaia whispered, “though only from sight, so try to keep quiet.”

Krailash nodded, and they crept closer to the mushroom fields. The blobby rows of fungus smelled strongly of old wet socks and intestinal distress; at least they didn’t have to worry about any of the especially sensitive slaves *smelling* their intrusion. Krailash paused, and pointed toward a low structure on the far side of the field. They had to go the long way, because cutting through the mushroom field would leave a swath of destruction that would certainly be noticed, and the slowness of their progress was maddening. They paused while a derro dressed in black leather and holding a cruelly-knotted whip stopped to help up a quaggoth who’d collapsed with exhaustion not three feet away from Krailash and Alaia. The derro murmured solicitously, helped the reeking, hairy beast man—which was easily two feet taller than the derro overseer—to its feet, gave it a long drink of water from his own canteen, and patted the quaggoth on the back. The slave bent down to pick

up its gathering basket, and while its back was turned, the derro overseer drew a wickedly curved knife as long as its own forearm and jammed it into the quaggoth's back, where the kidneys would be on a human. Krailash winced as the quaggoth roared, reared back, and then fell among the mushrooms. The derro overseer nudged the body with his foot, then strode off across the field shouting orders.

Krailash and Alaia continued, finally drawing close enough to see the holding pens clearly.

"Are those made of wood?" Alaia whispered. "Where would they get so much wood down here?"

Krailash shook his head. "Bone. They're made of bone." The slave pens were vast, long, low cages of lashed-together bones built up against one wall of the huge cavern. The cages were apparently divided into compartments by race, presumably to keep the more inimical varieties of slaves from killing one another. The kuo-toa compartment was backed against a dirty waterfall, so a cascade of water flowed through, and a few of the fish people huddled under the spray in a desultory way. As they watched, a pair of quaggoth slaves dragged the body of their recently-murdered comrade to the compartment of their race, and hurled the dead body in through the doors. The quaggoth inside fell upon the corpse and began tearing it apart for food. Alaia gagged at the smell, and Krailash didn't blame her. Weren't the quaggoths supposed to be natural shamans, with a connection to the primal world of the caverns? If so, seeing them brought so low and forced into servitude to creatures who venerated aberrations must be especially painful for Alaia.

"I don't see any humans," Krailash whispered, fearing the worst. What if all Zaltys's family had been killed long ago? Most of these other slaves were natural inhabitants of the Underdark, and probably better suited to the harshness of life there.

"I didn't expect to," Alaia whispered back. "But do you see Zaltys, or Julen? I don't—" She paused, and stopped breathing, and

Krailash looked at her with alarm. “No,” she whispered. “No, it can’t be.”

“What?” Krailash said, looking around for an enemy, and seeing none—or, at least, none that also saw *him*.

“The flowers,” Alaia murmured, and raised her finger, pointing.

Krailash hadn’t noticed before, but there were vines climbing up the wall of the cave, vanishing into the darkness above. They were covered in the familiar brilliant blue flowers that formed the foundation of the Serrat family’s power—terazul. “But that’s good,” Krailash said. “If there are terazul vines here, then the Guardians will definitely send a detachment to wipe out the derro, just to protect the monopoly.”

“The roots,” Alaia said. “Krailash, look at the *roots*.”

That would be something to see. No one on the surface had ever managed to pull up a terazul vine by the roots, they simply went too deep. Perhaps because they originated here, and the vines had only wound their inexorable way up to the surface over time. Krailash knew what Alaia must be thinking—perhaps a terazul vine transplanted with the roots intact would be more successful than mere cuttings were, and might be grown in a Delzimmer hothouse without losing its potency.

Krailash ran his eyes down along the course of the vines. The spread-out tendrils gradually drew together into a twisted central mass as thick as a tree trunk, which ran along the cavern wall in a roughly horizontal way until finally terminating in one of the blue-green spheres of twisting light. The vines emerged from that light. Wherever the roots took hold, it wasn’t in their world.

“Terazul are flowers of the Far Realm,” Alaia said, and her voice was like the sound of spring ice giving way beneath your feet. “I have devoted my life to spreading poison from a realm of madness.”



Zaltys raised her crossbow, loading in a bolt, and the guards by the door stirred, but Iraska said “Wait” in a commanding tone. “You wouldn’t shoot me, would you, Zaltys?” she said. “You don’t even know if I have an antidote.”

Zaltys swallowed. She hadn’t even thought of it—the instinctive reaction to attack someone who hurt her family had been too strong. Of course, the person she proposed to attack *also* claimed to be her family, but she felt more loyalty to the cousin who’d tried to help her than to the multiply-great-aunt who’d poisoned him. “Well? Is there an antidote?”

“No, but it’s hardly necessary.” She poured the contents of her cup into the pool. “The poison wears off after a few hours, actually. Usually that’s not a problem—we just include doses of the drug in the water rations we give to the especially savage and dangerous crop-slaves. We don’t bother giving it to all of our field workers, just the ones who have difficulty adjusting to the reality of their lives. Most of our captives are too broken-willed after a few days in the slave pens to cause us any problems.”

Zaltys looked at the cup in her other hand, and flung it at Iraska, who stepped neatly out of the way. The cup fell into the pool with a splash. “You poisoned me too? I don’t feel anything. And you drank from the same pitcher, so why don’t you ...?”

She shrugged. “You and I are naturally immune to this poison, and many others. Julen, being merely human, has no such immunities. You see, my dear, you’re like me. You’re yuan-ti.”

Zaltys stared at her. “I knew derro were crazy. I should have known their leader would be crazy. You say you’re a yuan-ti, and I am too? Are you sure I’m not a minotaur? Or a purple dragon? Maybe you’re a grell.”

Iraska returned to her desk, seemingly unconcerned by the crossbow pointed at her. She settled down into her chair and leaned back, gazing at Zaltys. “They call us purebloods, Granddaughter. To your human ear that probably makes it sound like you and I should

be exalted, I know, but yuan-ti see things differently. For people so closely related to snakes, being *low* is a virtue, and being raised high is nothing to be happy about. The most powerful of our race are called anathema, and those called abominations are also highly respected. Purebloods ... Well, some see us as gifts from Zehir, admittedly. Tools of conquest. Others consider us shameful throwbacks. There is human—or, anyway, humanoid—ancestry among the yuan-ti, and occasionally that strain is especially strong, and a yuan-ti is born seeming almost human. But there's always some telltale sign, some hint of the serpentfolk blood—a forked tongue, slit eyes, something. You've seen my fangs. When I lived among the humans, I had them filed down, but they grew back. How about you, Zaltys? Do you have anything like that? Perhaps a scar where a tail was removed? A patch of scales under your armpit?"

Though she didn't consciously will it, Zaltys's hand reached behind and touched the place at the small of her back where her skin was scarred, the place that always itched on her trips to the jungle, the site of the "fungal infection" that had to be periodically burned by the Serrat family surgeons with heated blades to keep it sanitized.

"Haven't you noticed an affinity with snakes? If you're with the Serrat family's Travelers—which is hilarious for reasons I'll explain once I have you settled in here—then you spend a lot of time in the jungle. Have you ever been bitten by a snake? Of course not. Because they recognize you ..." she gave another hideous smile, "as family. And if you had been bitten, you wouldn't have suffered any ill effects. The yuan-ti are bringers of poison. We are seldom poisoned. Do snakes, perhaps, follow you around? Look, there's one now, it followed you in from upstairs, didn't it?"

Zaltys looked at the pale serpent, which was apparently sleeping not far from Iraska's desk. "It can't be," she said softly. "I can't be. Yuan-ti are *monsters*. They do evil. I'm not evil."

Iraska clucked her tongue. “You’re looking at it all wrong. Yuan-ti are the superior race, beset on all sides by implacable enemies who refuse to embrace the true faith—including heretics of our own race who embrace the doddering, outdated god Sseth instead of the vigorous Zehir. Our serpentine relatives don’t commit acts of evil—they commit acts of necessity. Is it evil to step on a scorpion before it stings you? Is it evil to swat a fly because it annoys you? You’re with the Travelers. That means you cut a swath of fire and sharpened iron through the jungle on a regular basis, displacing native creatures, destroying native fauna, all for your own purposes—is that *evil*? Of course not. It’s just self-interest. And the Serrat family? Ha. They spread poison on a scale most yuan-ti can only *dream* of, and what’s more, the people they poison willingly pay for the privilege!”

“Don’t talk about my family that way. You don’t know anything *about* them!”

Iraska’s eyes glittered in the torchlight. “I wouldn’t say that. I knew your great-grandfather, a bit. From your adopted family, I mean. He was a thug and a thief and a smuggler. Not a bad sort, for a human.”

“He was brave and resourceful, and he built a business from nothing.”

“He was reckless, which isn’t the same as brave. And resourceful, I’ll grant you that, but it was really just one resource: terazul. The first employees in that business he built were paid in terazul powder. Or should I say ‘enslaved.’ The man had a magistrate addicted to the stuff, and certain key officials, and even a few lesser members of the four great families of Delzimmer, who fed him the information he needed to succeed in business and politics. Because in Delzimmer, business *is* politics.

“I was a spy in Delzimmer, you see, for the yuan-ti in this part of the jungle. The wealthy merchants of Delzimmer thought I was a highborn lady from across the jungle—jumped-up shopkeepers

always crave the attention of *real* royals, you see, and my coloration, which you share, was considered quite exotic. Things were going well for me too—indeed, I was the mistress of a high-placed merchant, and since his wife was dying of a slow wasting disease, courtesy of my deftness with poisons, I was poised to become a power myself in time. Unfortunately, your great-grandfather decided to engage in a little covert assassination to seize some of my lover's business interests at a reduced price, and once my patron was dead, his sick wife no longer tolerated my existence. I was suddenly homeless, and most decidedly unwelcome. I'd gone from beloved courtesan to cast-off trollop—so turns the wheel of fortune. I crawled back to the jungle in disgrace. So yes, Zaltys—I know your family. If we're comparing evil for evil, it's hard to say whether the yuan-ti or the Serrat would win.”

Zaltys wasn't crying, but it was a near thing. She was still holding the crossbow, but she wasn't aiming it at anything anymore. She kneeled down by Julen and began stroking his hair. He was breathing, slowly and steadily. That was a comfort, at least. “I'm human. I *feel* human. You're trying to trick me. That's your nature too. Yuan-ti are treacherous liars and—”

Iraska waved her hand and reclined in her desk chair. “Don't be silly. I don't consider myself a yuan-ti anymore. Oh, I am, by birth, like you, but just as you've been adopted into the Serrat family—a family of liars, I might add, who've obviously conspired heroically to keep your true origins from you, but that's neither here nor there—just as you've become a human by association, I've more or less become a derro. Although,” she leaned forward, and stage-whispered, “I just consider them a means to an end. You see, when I returned from Delzimmer, carrying with me nothing but the clothes on my back and a few jewels that proved to be simply worthless shiny rocks in the jungle, I was horrified by what I saw. My sect was ailing when I left, and the hope was that my influence in Delzimmer could turn things around, bring us new human cultists and more resources, but even if I'd succeeded, we were beyond help. The anathema are precious to the god Zehir, and they're

formidable creatures, but they're also prone to getting out of control. Ours had finally gone mad and killed almost everyone. Whether anyone *could* have stopped it was a moot point. The anathema are the most holy ones, chosen by our god, and so no one dared raise a hand against it. The old monster finally crawled into a hole and fell asleep, sated after eating half the tribe, and some enterprising low priest had a great heavy stone lid put on top of the hole, so the anathema could be revered from a safe distance, with sacrifices thrice daily. Pathetic. We were a mighty cult once, a power growing in the jungle, ready to burst out and spread our worldview with treachery and knives, but no more. I'd lived among humans long enough to gain a taste for the finer things, and the yuan-ti seemed hopelessly provincial, not to mention religiously obsessed. And why? Why revere a god who doesn't pay attention to you, who gives life to a great sentient conglomeration of snakes and then lets it *eat* you for no reason? Mind you, I wasn't the favorite daughter of the tribe, either, partly because I spoke my mind, mostly because I'm an ape-face. That's what they call people like us—at least, once we fail the cult, and no longer rate any respect. 'Ape-face.' Lovely, isn't it?"

Iraska yawned. "I don't usually talk this much. The derro don't go in for long conversations, at least, not coherent ones. Anyway, to draw a line from there to here, I went out walking in the jungle, got abducted by derro, and figured I'd suffer certain death. But then it turned out I'd learned some useful skills in Delzimmer after all. Politics, mostly. How to pour honey in a man's ear and make him do your bidding."

Zaltys frowned. Listening to Iraska's story at least spared her from agonizing over her own nature, and despite herself, she was interested. "You're the Slime King, I see it myself, but how can you advance by politics and"—disgusting thought—"seduction among insane people like the derro?"

"The derro are mad, but it's an almost artificial madness, the curse of some god or another who grew angry at their transgressions

millennia ago. *All* derro are mad, and though the exact manifestations vary, they're all mad in *exactly the same way*. And when everyone in a culture is insane in exactly the same way, do you know what we call that? We call that a cultural norm. We call that *sanity*. All derro are megalomaniacal with delusions of grandeur, and paranoid with persecution fantasies. Those are wonderful qualities for a skilled manipulator to work with. It was easy to whisper my way out of the slave pens, turning guard upon guard, getting the ear of the king—it was an actual derro at the time, imagine that—sowing dissent and treachery among the factions, eventually organizing my own ascent to the top. Or the bottom, I suppose, if you'd like to get technical."

"Queen of a tribe of homicidal lunatics," Zaltys said. "You must be so proud."

Iraska shrugged. "Are you proud to be heir to an empire devoted to giving addicts the drugs they use to kill themselves? Don't misunderstand—I think you *should* be proud. Any accomplishment of great scale is worthy of pride, Great-granddaughter. Besides, the derro are just a stepping stone. I realized when I came back from Delzimmer that the yuan-ti *aren't* the most powerful creatures in the universe. Far from it. They're provincial little *snakes*, to use a human pejorative. Which is why I enslaved your village—my village—*our* village, and dragged them down here. Because I wanted them to know how pitiful and worthless they are, how uncaring their god Zehir is. I put them in the slave pens by the mushroom fields, where I'll put your cousin too. If I made them soldiers, they'd all die in some skirmish or another, and why should I want our relatives to have the release of death?"

"So you're as delusional as the derro, then," Zaltys said. "You believe they're superior, and you've made yourself one of them."

"Oh, please. The derro believe they're masters of the universe, prevented from ascending to their true level of greatness only by the treachery of their million insidious enemies. But that's nonsense. Derro are degenerate scum. But Zaltys, there are forces in this

universe that *deserve* adoration, beings so powerful their might surpasses mortal understanding. Not the little aberrations that crawl and float here in the Underdark, the beholders and the grell and the like, and not even aboleths, though the aboleths come closer than most. I'm talking about creatures that were ancient when the gods weren't yet conceived of. Things so old and powerful they don't even have names, or need them. Entities that don't even notice our kind, except perhaps for a moment's fleeting sensation of pressure as they crush us beneath their vast and crawling bodies. On the far edges of the sky, there are sentient galaxies that watch us with hungry eyes made of suns. Things the size of our entire world, the continents of their bodies studded with malevolent eyes. Gigantic serpents made not of flesh and blood but the substance of stars, capable of poisoning reality itself with their venom. Conglomerations of singing tentacles and lashing pseudopods that can entangle the substance of time and space itself. These beings live far, far away from here, but they'd like to come closer. They'd like to be let into this world. And they can give power beyond imagining to the one who opens the door. That's why I took over the derro, because the savants here devoted their lives to opening those doors, and I needed to learn how. So I did, and now all the other derro who knew how to create these portals are dead, and I'm very close to perfecting my technique."

Iraska lifted her hands, and a blue and green ball of heatless flame coalesced in the air above the pool of water. "Those beings of power live in a place called the Far Realm," she said, her voice distant and dreamy. "And I am their herald."

Since her great-grandmother was busy staring up at a portal to a plane of infinite, unimaginable horror, Zaltys took the opportunity to shoot the old woman in the neck with a crossbow bolt.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

DESPITE THE LOUSY CONSTRUCTION OF THE DERRO crossbows, the bolt flew true and straight, and should have pierced Iraska's windpipe, hitting her with enough force to knock her out of her chair. Zaltys had already dropped her crossbow and reached for her bow so she could take out the guards by the door when she realized her great-grand-whatever wasn't dying like she was supposed to.

Instead, a shadowy shape formed around Iraska, a sort of silhouette of lashing tentacles, and one of those tentacles seized the crossbow bolt from the air and snapped it in half. When the tentacles receded, the silhouette vanishing, Iraska began to laugh. "Did you like that? There's a creature called the balhannoth that lurks in the tunnels, a blind stalker and ambusher, with lashing tentacles and a mouth big enough to swallow a derro whole. An aberration, of course, that slithered over from the Far Realm." She touched the necklace at her throat, and Zaltys noticed that her bracelets matched, they were bone, wound with dark strips of leather. "This jewelry is made from the body of a balhannoth and imbued with certain enchantments, and grants me some measure of the dead monster's abilities. Not *just* tentacles, but invisibility, and teleportation—not so different from the powers your little dead-snake skin gives you, though more potent, of course. You need shadows to disappear into." She raised her hands, and the torches in the room flared into greater light, banishing all shadows from the room and making Zaltys turn her face away from the brilliance. "I have no such limitations. Let's not fight, Zaltys. I know I've given you a lot to think about. You're confused and distraught, so I forgive your little attempted murder. It would be a shame to make you into a slave when you could be so

much more useful to me in other ways. Will you listen to my proposal?"

Zaltys nodded, but kept her arrow nocked on the string, though she didn't draw. The bow was magical, its arrows capable of avoiding obstacles to strike what the bow's wielder tried to hit. Would it be able to thread its way through those phantom tentacles? If she tried that and failed, would Iraska simply kill her?

"I propose," Iraska said, "that you return to the surface with those few humans I still have in my slave pens. I use them as front-line troops when we fight with other races down here, so there aren't many alive, but I think I have a few lying around the armory. Take them with you. Say they're your family, your fellow villagers—the humans will believe it, and they'll revere you for coming to save them. Be triumphant. Otherwise, go about your business. Rise in power, as I did when I was your age. Marry a powerful man—someone in the Guardians would be best, though not young Julen, he's seen too much here to be allowed to run around free. Ascend to supreme leadership of the Serrat family—I'll help if there are any obstacles in your way. And when the time comes, I will ask a favor of you. Nothing too difficult. Just opening a few doors in the city, to let me and some of my derro savants in, under cover of night, of course. Certain entities of the Far Realm are impressed by sacrifices, you know. We will open a portal, and let a few choice creatures through. I have the power to open huge portals already, though I've kept it a secret from the other derro—they're not models of patience and plotting, I'm afraid, unlike the yuan-ti. When the stars are right, with your help, the people of Delzimmer will die, but they're only human, mostly, with a scattering of dwarves and elves and other races of no particular consequence. Nothing a yuan-ti like you should concern yourself with. What do you say?"

"You're insane," Zaltys said. "I'd never betray my people that way."

"Betrayal is in your blood, dear," Iraska said. "And I think you *will*, because your return to the surface won't be a complete triumph; your cousin Julen will be lost down here. I promise I'll take good

care of him, though, as long as you behave. If *family* is so important to you, I'm sure you'll obey me while I hold the power of life and death over your kin. Rather stupid of you to tell me the easiest way to control you, Zaltys. But I'll teach you subtlety yet."

Something flashed by Zaltys, streaking toward Iraska's body. Her spectral balhannoth tentacles appeared, reaching for the missile—but Iraska screamed as green vines erupted, wrapping up the tentacles. She flickered, briefly invisible, but a vegetable eruption dragged her back to the place where she'd been standing. Suddenly the guards by the door charged over, but the growing mass of green caught them too, and pulled them down, covering them in leaves so thoroughly they vanished from sight. Where Iraska's desk had been, there was only a mound of greenery, with the hilt of a knife sticking out from the top.

"Huh," Julen said, limping over, climbing up the side of the green mass, and plucking the dagger from the mound before climbing back down. "So *that's* what this knife does. Pretty impressive magic."

Zaltys stared at him. "Julen. You were *poisoned*."

He rolled his eyes. "Cousin, I'm a *Guardian*. We specialize in poison, both administering it and surviving it. My father poisons my oatmeal in the mornings just to give me extra practice, and I've been taking tiny doses of various toxins to build up immunity since I was four years old. When I felt myself wavering, I realized she'd put something in my drink, and I took one of the emergency pills my father packed for me, for those occasions when one can't avoid being poisoned. Tastes like charcoal, though I gather there's magic in it too. Then I just played dead until I saw an opportune moment. I thought maybe this knife, being magical, might slip through her tentacles, but I didn't expect *this*." He prodded the mound of leaves with his foot. "Now I wonder even more who gave the dagger to me."

“So you were awake,” Zaltys said. “You heard everything.” Her hope of somehow escaping and keeping the secret of her true nature drained away.

He shrugged. “So you’re yuan-ti. Great-uncle Gustavus is a lycanthrope, and—this is a Guardians secret—our head of overseas enforcement is an adopted half-orc, though he looks like a very tall and ugly human. You’re *family*, Zaltys. That’s what matters.”

She shook her head. “If that was all that mattered, why would mother have lied to me about what I am? And Krailash *hates* yuan-ti—she must have lied to him too, otherwise I think he’d have killed me out in the jungle years ago.”

Julen chewed his lip in thought. “Yuan-ti don’t seem like very nice people, but as far as that goes, we Serrats aren’t always very nice people, either. You were raised as one of us. You don’t worship the yuan-ti snake god, you don’t poison people, you aren’t—” he grinned “—especially subtle. As far as I’m concerned, you’re a Serrat. And your secret is safe with me.”

It was true. Zaltys didn’t worship Zehir, but knowing she was yuan-ti put her dreams and visions in a new context. She had no interest in Zehir, but what if that god of poisons and darkness was interested in *her*?

“Do you think we should flee while we still can? Before something unspeakable squeezes itself out of that portal up there?”

Zaltys nodded. “Yes. But I need to go to the mushroom fields and free the slaves. Even if my villagers are snake people and cultists of Zehir, they’re still my *people*, and they deserve better than this.”

“All right,” Julen said, shrugging into his pack, but keeping the green-wrapped knife in his hand. “I’ve come with you this far, and I won’t turn my back on you just because your relatives turned out to be a little unsavory. I assumed they’d be uncouth jungle savages with dirt in their hair anyway. The fact that they’re fork-tongued, uncouth jungle savages who don’t have any hair at all shouldn’t change things substantially. I just hope they don’t try to kill us.” He

inclined his head to the mound of vegetation, which was starting to go brown and die around the edges already, perhaps because Julen had removed the magical knife. “Do you think anyone will notice your auntie is out of commission?”

“No one sees the king while the king is the king,” Zaltys said. “I think we’re okay, assuming we can get upstairs without being killed. I wish we could kick this whole mess of greenery into the water, but it would be like trying to kick an orchard. I wonder if my mother left you the knife? It seems a bit primal, but I can’t imagine she’d have let you come down here if she’d known what we had planned.”

“We’ll ask her when we make it to the surface again.” They walked around the pool and unlatched the heavy wooden door. The guards outside didn’t pay them any attention as they emerged. Presumably the sentries were meant to keep people from going in, and had very little interest in whether anyone came out. The savant who’d led them downstairs was still on the ground, possibly dead, though the robe of eyes was gone. Her skin, pale as curdled milk, was covered in strange tattoos, also of eyes, but they were all closed, lids and long lashes drawn down.

Zaltys and Julen stepped over her gingerly and went up the stairs. They reached the hall of miniature kingdoms and tried not to look into them, but a voice called from the first one they passed. “Humans!” it shouted, and they looked in to see Bug-eater seated in an ornate (if chipped) gilded throne, his feet propped on a dead derro he’d arranged into a sort of corpse foot stool. “Was your meeting with the Slime King all you’d hoped?”

“Very informative,” Zaltys said. “Have you renounced your vow of incomprehensibility?”

“I am the lord of all I survey, excepting the hallway,” he said, “and so it behooves me to make myself understood. Would you like to come in for dinner? There’s a crack in the wall swarming with

beetles. They taste a bit like gecko and a bit like bat and a bit like human.”

“Thank you. Perhaps another time.” Zaltys gave him a little bow, which Julen hastily copied, and Bug-eater waved at them in lofty dismissal.

An array of screams and grunts and the scrape of metal on bone emerged from the other rooms, but none of the other little kings called out to them as they went past. They ascended the far staircase without incident and emerged into the grand museum hall, which was strangely deserted. As they hurried among the exhibits, they saw why. One of the portals to the Far Realm, near the forge, was birthing a monstrosity of lashing tentacles, and all available derro had gone to man the nets to drag it down.

“If Iskara reveres things from that place so much, why does she capture them?” Julen said.

Zaltys shook her head. “I think Iskara is after something *bigger*. She mentioned something the size of a world with eyes. And she seemed to have contempt for these other aberrations. Didn’t you tell me aboleths are possibly the oldest things in the *universe*?”

“So I’ve read. Do you think Iskara’s just insane? That she’s trying to open portals for something that doesn’t even exist?”

“Maybe,” Zaltys said. “But it’s not something I’d care to risk. I wish there was a way we could close these portals. It’s a shame they didn’t close when you killed Iskara.”

Julen frowned. “*Did* I kill her, though? She was wrapped up in vines, yes, but is that enough to kill something as old and powerful as she seems to be? Or did we just trap her?”

“That’s a happy thought,” Zaltys said. “Let’s hurry and free the slaves and get out of here before we find out whether’s she’s dead or only inconvenienced.”

“All right, we’re probably looking for something near the mushroom fields, but those were vast, they fill almost this whole

cavern, so where do we start—”

The pale snake came slithering down the steps, curled around Zaltys’s feet, and looked up at her. Zaltys stared at it.

“Ah,” Julen said after a moment. “Are you talking to the snake?”

“No,” Zaltys said. “I can’t do that, as far as I know. I’m just thinking. Trying to figure out whose pawn I am, exactly, and how I can be sure the next move I make is my own.” She flicked her fingertips at the snake. “Go on then. Show me the way to my family, or go away forever.”

The snake lowered its head and began undulating across the square, and Zaltys and Julen followed.



“I don’t understand,” Krailash said, staring at the portal, and the terazul vines. “The plants—they come from another *plane*?”

“A plane so alien that just a glimpse of it strips sanity from the mind like corpse beetles tearing flesh from a dead body,” Alaia said. She was sitting on the ground, and her spirit companion appeared to be asleep, two things that made Krailash profoundly uneasy. “And we’ve been selling people potions and powders made from a flower rooted in that plane. The visions people have when they take terazul tinctures, the energy and strength they feel when they ingest the powders, the madness that certain addicts fall into—the ones we call weak, the ones we’re so careful to blame for their own downfall—they’re all gifts of horrors from the Far Realm. What if the vines aren’t plants at all? What if they’re the tentacles of some ancient slumbering creature drifting through the infinite layers of the Far Realm, and the flowers are something like *hairs*, or warts, or fingernails? What if we’re strengthening the power of aberrations in this world?” Alaia drew her fingers down her cheeks, so hard her fingernails drew blood, so it appeared she was shedding red tears. “What have I done, Krailash? I’m a shaman. Defender of nature, servant of the primal world and peddler of poisons from a place inimical to everything I thought I believed in.”

“I’ll chop through the vines,” Krailash said, lifting Thunder’s Edge, though practically speaking, the problem was more difficult than that. The portal through which the plants emerged hovered near the cavern wall some twenty feet up, and he wasn’t sure he could climb that high, as the wall was distressingly smooth.

“No,” Alaia said sharply. “Kill those vines, and you reduce our family’s fortunes by half at a single stroke. If word got back that I was responsible for the loss of supply, everyone in my family would turn against me. I would be stripped of my position, and even my name, shunned and exiled. You know family is everything to me, Krailash—you can’t *do* this. And with no terazul, there’s no need for Travelers. What would become of *you*?”

Krailash shook his head. “But you said it yourself, they’re from the Far Realm—we can’t let them continue to poison the world!”

“There’s the world,” Alaia said, with a small shrug. She reached out and touched her spirit companion’s head, and seemed to address her next words to the boar. “And there’s family. I’m a Serrat. I will always choose family.”

Her spirit companion stood up, looked at her with wide-eyed sorrow, and shook its gray head. The spirit boar took a step, and then another, and seemed to walk out of reality entirely, leaving no trace behind. The shimmering curtain of sparkles and shadows that covered them abruptly dissolved. “Alaia,” Krailash whispered. “What happened?”

She shrugged again. “I made a choice. As a shaman, I am a defender of the natural world from outsiders and aberrations—shamans exist, in part, to combat the influence of the Far Realm. If I can’t do that, if I choose *not* to do that, how can I be a shaman? It’s a good thing I’m incomprehensibly wealthy and a skilled administrator, because I’m not a shaman anymore.”

“What do you mean? The primal world has forsaken you?”

Alaia laughed bitterly. “The primal world doesn’t *notice* me, it’s not conscious, it’s just power. But ...” She made a sad grasping motion

with her hands, curling and uncurling her fingers. “Now that power is like smoke. I can still sense it, but it’s receding, and when I try to let the power flow through me, it slips through my fingers. I think *I’ve* forsaken it. In truth, it’s been harder and harder to access my abilities with every passing year. Too much time spent in cities. Too much time putting things other than the fate of the world and nature itself first.” She shook her head. “And now it’s all gone. If we’re going to get out of here alive, it will be based on your strength as a warrior.”

Krailash stood between Alaia and the field of mushrooms, because as they were no longer magically hidden, it was only a matter of time before an overseer noticed them.

“Or will you turn on me too, as my power has?” Alaia said. “Have I shown you the true face of my avarice, and disgusted you?”

“I made an oath when I came to work with you, to serve the Serrat family, specifically the Travelers, specifically *you*. Dragonborn stand by their oaths. I was always disgusted by the family business—though I admit, thinking you were mere drug peddlers was better than knowing you were unwitting pawns of the Far Realm. What if those flowers are doing more than poisoning people—what if they’re poisoning *reality*? Part of some effort to annex our world to that plane of madness? I have heard the stories your family tries to keep quiet, about the children of addicts born dead, and deformed —”

“Children of drunkards are sometimes stillborn, or born twisted too,” Alaia said, but without much conviction.

“The children of drunks are never born with *tentacles*,” Krailash said levelly. “But you misunderstand me. I made oaths, and I stand by them. I will still serve you, despite everything.”

“You’re a good friend, Krailash.”

He shook his head. “A good friend would try to talk you out of this, Alaia, and convince you to kill those flowers. No. I’m a terrible

friend. But I'm an exceptionally good employee. Should we look for Zaltys's people? She might be with them."

Alaia didn't get up from the ground. "Zaltys doesn't have any *people*, Krailash. Not human ones, anyway. She's not a woman—she's a yuan-ti. Her village was a cult of snake people. She just *looks* like a human. I don't know why. Maybe she's a mythical chosen one, born once every ten generations. Or maybe she's a throwback to humanoid stock in the yuan-ti bloodline. I always wanted to believe the latter. But ever since you met that god, I've been afraid it's the former."

Krailash lowered his guard long enough to stare at her. "But ... You mean Zaltys is a spy?"

"No, I mean her family are yuan-ti. She was just an infant when they were taken, and she was raised as a human—as far as she knows she *is* human, unless she was unlucky enough to find the yuan-ti slaves and learn otherwise. I just hope they can't sense their own, and that they won't recognize her as one of them."

"But she could have been tainted by Zehir," Krailash said, horrified by the thought. He'd taught Zaltys to fight, hunt, stalk, kill—and she was a snakeman? Had he given the weapons that might kill him to one of his enemies? "The cultists of Zehir and Sseth are subtle, Alaia, you've never had to fight with them, but I have—"

"Our psion Glory checked out her mind thoroughly," Alaia snapped. "Zaltys is my *daughter*, and you're sworn to defend her too. You're so ridiculous on this subject—it's why we wipe your mind every time you find out."

Krailash gaped. "I—you've tampered with my mind?"

Alaia gave him a thin smile. "Just a little. All legal, of course. Read your contract. When you signed, you gave us permission to protect vital family secrets—and the fact that Zaltys is yuan-ti is one of them."

Krailash wanted to swing his axe at her: at Alaia, the woman he'd worked for and joked with for three decades, the woman he would have called his closest friend, even minutes ago. He let Thunder's Edge sag loose in his hands. "You didn't trust me enough to tell me the truth about Zaltys? Of course it's a shock to hear, but I'm sure in time I would have gotten used to it."

"I didn't want to risk that you'd forget your oath and try to kill her, Krailash. Though I depend on you, and trust you, and care for you. Zaltys is my daughter. I never wanted to hurt you—that's why I had Glory wipe your memories—but I had to keep my daughter safe. I needed *you* to keep her safe, and I didn't know if you could continue to do that, if you knew the truth about her."

Krailash couldn't decide whether to walk away, or attack the nearest derro overseer, or lunge at Alaia. The conflicting demands of honor, pride, dignity, and duty pulled him in different directions, and paralyzed him.

Fortunately, he didn't have to make a decision. He heard shouting, and when he looked toward the slave pens, he saw Zaltys—looking dirty, and disheveled, but *human*—running his way, trailed closely by Julen.

His training had him on his feet and racing in her direction before he had a moment to think. He was a protector, and Zaltys and Julen were in need of protection, because they were being pursued by a horror his eyes could not quite comprehend.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

ZALTYS AND JULEN WERE ALL THE WAY ACROSS THE SQUARE when they heard the shout: “Stop them!” Though they probably shouldn’t have, they paused long enough to look back. At first, Julen thought some kind of forest monster was pursuing them, perhaps one of the ambulatory and minimally self-aware conglomerations of carnivorous vines that waylaid travelers in the jungle. But as the green figure stumbled down the steps, fragments of greenery tearing away and fluttering behind, he realized it was Iraska. Shouldn’t have pulled out the knife, he thought, but he’d done so automatically—you didn’t leave a perfectly good knife sticking in a dead body. You could never tell when you’d need another blade, especially a *magical* one.

The Slime King was bloody and her robes were frayed. The vines weren’t coming away easily; they were taking chunks of flesh and fabric with them—but she was alive, and her phantom tentacles were lashing in the air. Most of the derro in the settlement were still busy subduing the creature that had crawled out of the portal, but she’d brought two blindfolded guards with her and, worse, all the little sovereigns and some of their creations, including the quaggoth with the eyes of a beholder wavering on stalks. One of those eyes emitted a reddish light, and the facade of bones on a low building near Julen and Zaltys burst into flames.

“Zaltys, vanish, save yourself!” he shouted, but she just grabbed his hand and pulled him along after her. She’d managed to hide him in her shadow once before, but she couldn’t take him with her if she stepped through shadows to escape, and she was apparently unwilling to go without him. That was very thoughtful of her, though it was also a trifle suicidal. They dodged among the

buildings as the crowd of derro and their furious Slime King pursued them, and sooner than Julen expected they'd burst out among the mushroom fields. The derro behind them were gaining, and the overseers in the field were staring at them in surprise, so Julen dropped his pack to lose the weight and make himself run faster—he had his weapons with him, and losing his food and drinking water and lockpicks didn't rank among his current worries. He pulled his hand away from Zaltys and ran toward the field of mushrooms, shouting "Split up!" and hoping they could at least reduce the number of pursuers after each of them.

"No!" Zaltys shouted, and pointed toward the long low cages made of pale wood—the slave pens, obviously.

Dedication to family is all well and good, he thought, but I'd rather be alive than noble. But he couldn't very well yell *that* sentiment, and who knew, maybe if they freed the slaves they could escape themselves in the ensuing confusion. Assuming the slaves weren't all too cowed or drugged to bother causing any confusion.

"Mother!" Zaltys shouted, and Julen thought, Aren't we a bit old to be calling for mommy? Then Zaltys shouted "Krailash! You heard me call! You came!" and Julen realized she was calling to people *there in the cavern*—Krailash was there, holding his great battle-axe, and Alaia was there too, though her ever-present dire boar spirit companion was nowhere to be seen. Julen began to grin. The Slime King was formidable, certainly, but Alaia was one of the most powerful shamans in the region, and shamans *lived* to destroy unnatural things like Iraska had become. He wondered what she would do—summon giant bears to eat their enemies? Call up a wind to strip the flesh from Iraska's old bones? Summon a priory of ghost panthers to slash and bite and claw?

But she didn't do anything. She just stood there, staring at Zaltys. And Zaltys veered off course, running to one of the cages. There were eight or ten creatures inside, roughly human-sized, and all more or less snakelike. Some had the lower bodies of serpents, while others had arms and legs, but all had the heads of snakes—as

essentially reptilian creatures, they didn't look so terribly different from Krailash, except for the absence of frills on the cheeks and ears, and the fact that they mostly lacked legs. They stared at Zaltys in confusion as she started smashing at the bars of their cage with her magical bow. It was no way to treat such a weapon—bows weren't clubs, and could be easily broken—but then, it was a magical bow, and you could probably use it to smash down a brick wall without breaking the back or the belly or even spoiling the curve. Still, it was surprising to see Zaltys use her bow that way, when she wouldn't even risk damaging it by leaving it strung, but desperation did strange things to a person.

Krailash rushed toward Zaltys, holding his axe high, and for a moment, Julen thought, He's realized she's yuan-ti, he's going to kill her! But instead, Krailash grabbed her, swung her around behind him as easily as Julen would have moved a kitten, and then struck the cage with Thunder's Edge. The bars splintered and shattered at the first blow, and the yuan-ti started to slither hesitantly out.

Julen looked behind him, and Iraska and her terrible retinue were very close, kicking up spores as they charged through the mushroom fields toward them. He drew his green knife again, hoping he wouldn't need to use it, still waiting for Alaia to do something suitably shamanic and conflict-ending. Krailash took a stance between the onrushing horde and the members of the Serrat family he was sworn to protect, and the freed yuan-ti—knowing a good thing when they saw it—hurried behind him as well. The other slaves in the pens, kuo-toa and quaggoths and bullywugs and who knew what else, all chattered and screamed and shouted and croaked and pleaded for freedom. Zaltys stepped beside Krailash, her magical bow in her hands, her woefully underfilled quiver of arrows hanging from her shoulder. “For family!” she shouted, and nocked an arrow.

Then Alaia pushed past her, and stepped in front of Krailash, and said, “Avert your eyes, children!”

Julen, who'd learned very well to obey his elders, turned his head aside, and that's when Alaia apparently exploded in a burst of blinding light.



Krailash realized what Alaia was going to do an instant before she did it, and squeezed his eyes shut. Still, the light was bright enough to make his eyelids glow red, just a flash, there and gone, and he opened his eyes, knowing the advantage wouldn't last for long.

"I may have lost my powers, but at least I still have this nice robe," Alaia said, smoothing the fabric of her robe of stars. The magic in the gown allowed it to create a sudden flash of light, blinding one's enemies—and for the light-sensitive denizens of the Underdark, it was be even more debilitating. The charging woman—a human? how strange—wearing tattered shreds of vines pressed her hands to her eyes and howled, while the derro and their monstrous followers stumbled around in a daze. Only two of the derro were unaffected, hulking figures with blindfolds wrapped around their eyes, and Krailash decided to kill them first, but an arrow and a throwing knife steaked past him, striking them both down courtesy of Zaltys and Julen pressing the advantage. Krailash lunged into action, swinging his great axe and bellowing, attacking any derro who came close.

The fight was going well—truly, it was more of a massacre—but then something insubstantial but impossibly strong, like the tentacles of a ghostly kraken, wrapped around his chest and lifted him into the air, hurling him at the cavern wall. He struck with enough force to knock all the wind out of him, and slid down. Dazed, unable to get his breath, he stared up at the twisting portals that hovered over the field. They were moving, drifting like clouds, but coming together, forming into a larger sphere that crackled with lightning in colors he didn't know the names for—colors that made his head ache and his eyes burn. Only the portal on the wall, where the terazul flowers emerged, didn't move—otherwise all the

spheres floating in the cavern drew together, like iron filings drawn to a magnet.

He didn't know what it meant. Probably it was important. Possibly even deadly. He should do something about it, if only he could remember how to stand up, and how to move.



Zaltys was impressed by her mother's light show, but a bit disappointed it didn't flash-fry the derro where they were standing—she'd expected something more powerful, but her mother's journey had probably been arduous, to judge by the bloody scratches on her face. Zaltys felt guilty about Alaia's presence, since now she was in danger too. Zaltys had only wanted to help her family; she hadn't meant to endanger her *other* family.

She'd had some hope that, once she freed them, the yuan-ti might wade into battle spitting venom and flashing fangs, but they seemed content to stand back and see how things developed. Hardly surprising, given that they'd been enslaved for nearly twenty years, but disappointing nonetheless.

While their enemies were blind, Zaltys and Julen did their best to pick them off, starting with the two blindfolded derro and then focusing on Iraska. Julen threw his green knife, but by bad luck it just missed Iraska and instead struck the quaggoth with the beholder eyes, which went down in a mass of crawling greenery. Julen swore and threw ordinary daggers at Iraska, but her phantom tentacles batted them away, so he shifted his attention, hurling more knives and felling other derro—including Bug-eater, who said, very clearly, "Not fair!" before dropping to the ground with a hilt growing out of his chest.

Zaltys stared at Iraska, and willed all other distractions to drop away. She lifted her beautiful bow, and reached behind her for an arrow: one of the special ones Quelamia had given her. The arrowhead glittered like a diamond. The wizard had told Zaltys it was a shard of crystal from something called the Living Gate, a

potent weapon against aberrations and Iraska was at least part aberration with her spectral tentacles lashing.

The distractions of the battlefield fell away. Krailash was charging in with an axe, Julen was throwing knives, and her mother was handing the yuan-ti long shafts of bone and urging them—futilely—to use them as clubs, but Zaltys only let herself see Iraska, a terrible apparition in shreds of greenery. She settled into her stance, nocked the arrow, and drew smoothly, pulling back until her fingers touched the corner of her mouth. She sighted a little low and to the side to account for paradox—the strange way an arrow curved out and around when it left a bow—but she needn't have bothered. With a bow like that, she couldn't miss.

Just before she loosed, Zaltys saw Iraska take notice of Krailash, who was rapidly laying waste to her warriors—who were, after all, mostly savants and mad surgeons, not even proper derro fighters. Her terrible tentacles lashed out and grabbed Krailash, flinging him against the wall.

Zaltys gasped, and her fingers let go of the bowstring without her volition. The shot was spoiled, she was sure, but the arrow flew straight, flickering out of sight when an armless derro spurting blood from his wounds stumbled into its path, and reappearing on the other side of the obstruction. The crystalline arrowhead hit Iraska dead in the center of her chest, knocking the old yuan-ti onto her back among the mushrooms. The moment the arrow struck the Slime King, the phantasmal bahannoth that surrounded her like a foul aura writhed wildly, screamed, and disappeared.

Zaltys rapidly used up the rest of her arrows, loosing them almost casually at the surviving derro. She used the two with magical arrowheads too, and so one of the derro burned, and one turned to stone, but she didn't pay much attention. Her great-great-grandmother or aunt or whatever she might have been was dead. The rest was just mopping up. The last few derro broke and tried to run back to the settlement, but the yuan-ti slaves chose that moment to act, surging forward with their clubs and taking them

from behind, swinging wildly but effectively. Zaltys winced. They were taking out the frustrations of long captivity on their oppressors, she understood that, but still, attacking fleeing enemies seemed like poor form.

Julen touched her shoulder. "Are you all right?" he said.

"I am. I don't know about Krailash." Alaia was kneeling beside the fallen dragonborn, and Julen and Zaltys hurried to her side.

"I can't understand you," Alaia was saying. "Krailash, I'm sorry, I'm trying, but your jaw, it was broken on the wall, I can't—"

"Voo. Geen. Ortals." Krailash's face was smashed, and he was trying to stand up, with Alaia doing her best to hold him down. The fact that she, a hundred-and-ten-pound human, managed to hold a three-hundred-pound dragonborn down suggested his injuries were grave.

"Mother, heal him, please," Zaltys said, "he's suffering."

She shook her head. "I can't, Zaltys, I wish I could. My powers have, ah ... It's complicated. If we can get him to the surface—"

"Ortals!" Krailash tried to shout, and blood spurted from the remains of his mouth. His eyes were wide and intent.

"Is he saying 'portals'?" Julen said.

"Probably," the Slime King said. Zaltys turned, and Iraska was there, holding the arrow that should have killed her in her hand. All the portals above the field and over the settlement had somehow formed together into a single vast orb, which hovered just behind her, big as a manor house. The yuan-ti in the field were cowering and covering their heads, hiding from its terrible blue-green light.

"Isn't it beautiful?" Iraska snapped the crystalline head off the arrow and slipped it into her sleeve, then broke the arrowshaft in her hands, dropping the pieces. "You shot me with a shard of the Living Gate, which once formed a wall between the realms of madness and the Astral Sea. Impressive. But that crystal kills aberrations—not necessarily mortals. All you did was banish my

balhannoth. Which was a bit like halfway dying myself. I hadn't realized how deep into my body and my being its tendrils had extended. But that's the Far Realm for you. So subtle and insidious it makes the cunning of Zehir seem like a brass band falling down the stairs in comparison. Shame you wasted the arrow, Zaltys. If you'd loosed it into my portal, I bet it would have closed up." She walked closer, the gate hovering behind her, and Julen threw a knife, but the portal flared bluer, and a rosy pink tentacle lashed out of the portal and dashed the blade aside. Even with her balhannoth dead, Iraska still had the support of creatures in the Far Realm.

"That was my last dagger," Julen said quietly. "Oh, well. Good effort, everyone."

"You can still join me, Zaltys. Turn on these fools. You can be a hero, the sole survivor of the massacre that killed the rest of the Travelers. I can show you the pathways of power. I don't want to let my friends from the Far Realm come through this portal just yet. We haven't quite come to terms, and they'd much rather emerge in a more populated place anyway, like Delzimmer. Especially since your family has been preparing the way all these years by poisoning so many citizens with terazul flowers, turning the addicts into unwitting pawns of the realm of madness, just waiting to be activated. When we invade, the taint in their blood will transform them into aberrations."

Zaltys looked at her mother, eyes wide—the terazul were connected to the Far Realm? Alaia wouldn't meet her gaze.

Iraska went on. "They're gluttonous, you see, and prefer a larger meal, and more chaos. But if you force my hand, I'll open the gates now. Well?"

"Run, Zaltys," Alaia said. "Use your armor, slip through shadows. Get to the surface. Get the Guardians. Tell them to avenge us."

"There's another way," Zaltys said, and jumped at Iraska.

Only to fall on her face when Krailash seized her ankle with one of his hands. He spoke, and though the words were a bit mushy

coming from his ruined face, she could understand him: “My duty.”

The dragonborn heaved himself from the cavern wall, axe in hand, and barreled straight for Iraska. Her eyes widened, and a tentacle licked from the portal, but he swung his axe almost casually and severed it. Krailash struck Iraska with his head lowered and his shoulder out, lifting her off her feet and driving her into the portal. His own momentum carried him through the portal with her, and they both vanished.

The portal writhed and sparked and twisted, curling in on itself, losing length and width and depth until nothing remained but a wisp of greenish vapor and a chemical stink like something from an alchemist’s shop.

“The arrowhead,” Zaltys said. “She still had it in her sleeve, the piece of the Living Gate.” She shook her head. “The portals are closed. And Krailash ...”

“He gave his life to protect the family,” Alaia said. “I wasn’t sure he would. I’m ashamed I ever doubted him.”

“That portal didn’t close,” Julen said, pointing to one Zaltys hadn’t noticed before, hovering near the cave wall. “Why didn’t it join with the others?”

“It is very old,” one of the yuan-ti said, slithering over, wringing his oddly humanlike hands. “The other slaves, some of them have been here for much longer than we have, and they said this portal has always been here. It was opened by the first Slime King long ago.”

“Are those *terazul*?” Zaltys said, squinting. “The vines, coming out of the portal ... Those are *our* flowers, aren’t they? That’s what Iraska meant, isn’t it, about us poisoning the people of Delzimmer—about us *preparing* them.”

“Zaltys,” Alaia said carefully. “I didn’t know. I swear. I had no idea they came from the Far Realm.”

“You do *now*,” Zaltys said. “So what do you propose to do about it?”

“I propose we leave before the other derro come back. I propose we take your, ah, original family members back with us, and then return to camp, and go home. I’ll tell the other ranking members of our family what I’ve found out, and I’m sure they’ll do the right thing. Given some time and preparation, we can diversify the business a bit better, make some investments, and ease out of the terazul trade.”

Julen snorted. “No offense, Aunt Alaia, but do you think the Traders will care that the flowers come from the Far Realm? They’ll just start saying the drugs are ‘imported from an exotic faraway land’ and charge twenty percent more per dose.”

“We should destroy the flowers and close that portal,” Zaltys said. “The things I saw in that derro city, the cruelty, the madness—it’s all the influence of the Far Realm. And we’ve been getting rich off selling people poisonous flowers from that place. We have to stop. It’s wrong. Iraska’s gone, but how long before another Slime King rises and opens more portals? Maybe the next one will succeed in attacking Delzimmer, and if we’re still selling the flowers, we’ll be paving the way for that invasion. We have to do what’s right.”

“Life isn’t that simple,” Alaia said. “Right and wrong, Zaltys, they’re *complicated* ideas, not all situations are so simple.”

“Sometimes,” she said. “Sometimes that’s true. I know. But not this time. Julen. Go and get me the green knife, and the straightest bit of bone you can salvage from the cage.”

He went obediently to the mound of vegetation covering the poor altered quaggoth, plucked the knife from the mess, and went in search of a suitable shaft.

“If you do this, you ruin us,” Alaia said quietly. “You ruin the family.”

“If I don’t, I really am that madwoman’s great-granddaughter, and I have no desire to follow in her footsteps—to be a herald for monsters from beyond the back of the stars. The family can get into

some less poisonous business. They certainly have the capital to finance it.”

“They won’t see it that way, Zaltys. We’re used to doing things a certain way, and the terazul trade is central to—”

Zaltys turned to her, put her hands on her mother’s shoulders, leaned forward, and kissed her on each bloody cheek. “You raised me to revere family, and I do. But you also raised me to do what’s right, and to protect the natural world. What kind of daughter would I be to you if I didn’t learn those lessons?”

She turned her back on her mother, so she wouldn’t have to see the suddenly very old-looking onetime shaman weep. She looked at her cousin. “Do you object to my plan?”

He shrugged. “I’m seventh in line to run the Guardians, which means I may as well be thousandth in line. No real future there. And someone with my skills will never go hungry. So, sure—let’s do the right thing. But do you think this will really work?” He was attaching the end of the green knife to a long, slender shaft of a bone with a bit of leather cord. Zaltys was impressed; he’d figured out what she had in mind.

“Someone gave you that knife. It certainly seems to hum with primal power, and primal power exists in opposition to the aberrations of the Far Realm. I’m a little bit afraid the dagger might have come from, ah—” She glanced at the yuan-ti. “A certain god who shall remain nameless. But if it works, what choice do we have?”

“Loose at will,” he said, and handed her the improvised arrow. It was a ridiculous thing—so top-heavy with the dagger tied to the end that it would simply spin and hit the dirt, with no fletching to make it fly straight even if it *could* fly, and the thighbone of some underfed Underdark denizen didn’t make a suitable shaft.

But what else were magical bows for? Krailash said he’d seen this one fire a spear once.

Zaltys nocked it, and as soon as the arrow touched the bowstring, it stopped feeling like an improvised spear and started feeling like an arrow. She aimed, drew, and loosed, and the knife-tipped arrow sailed into the portal where the terazul vines emerged.

Nothing happened. “Damn,” Julen said. “All right, we can at least cut the vines off from their roots in the portal. I’ll see if I can scale the cavern wall.”

The vines trembled. The portal pulsed. Something pushed its way partly through the portal, and afterward, no one could agree on exactly what it had looked like. Zaltys thought it had the head of a fish, while Julen insisted it was more like a bird, and Alaia said it looked like the snout of a mole. Whatever it was, it had far too many eyes, and its mouth was open, and the terazul vines came from *inside* that mouth, as if they were its tongue—which, given the strangeness of the Far Realm, was entirely possible. The hideous snout was wrapped around with brilliant green leaves, still growing at a ferocious pace, and the creature howled as vegetation choked and bound it.

The creature pulled its head back in, and the portal vanished, just as the larger portal had before. The cut-off ends of the terazul vines drooped where they clung to the cavern wall, and the blue flowers began to shower down, wilting and turning brown as they fell.

“Done,” Zaltys said, and turned to the yuan-ti, who were looking at her with something she uncomfortably identified as awe. “I am Zaltys Serrat, adopted daughter of the Serrat family, natural born daughter of—”

“It’s the girl child,” the yuan-ti who’d spoken to her earlier said. His tongue, long and forked, flickered wildly. “Zaltys, I am Scitheron. I knew you when you were a babe.” He turned to the other snakefolk. “This woman, she is the pureblood, the infant left behind when Iraska sent her people to enslave us. She’s come back! She’s come back to save us!”

“Now maybe you can save me,” Zaltys said. “I don’t suppose any of you know the way out?”

“No,” the yuan-ti said. “But I think that snake is trying to get your attention. Perhaps it is a messenger of our great god Zehir, who chose you as the instrument of our salvation?”

Indeed, the pale serpent was back, coiling and uncoiling itself impatiently, and when Zaltys looked at it, it began to slither away from the fields and the settlement. “Wait,” Zaltys said. “Do any of you yuan-ti speak the language of the Underdark?”

“Deep Speech?” Scitheron said. “I do.”

“Tell these slaves we’ll set them free if they don’t hinder our escape.”

“They are beasts, daughter of Zehir,” Scitheron said, “foul creatures who do not keep the true faith.”

“Please, just tell them?”

Reluctantly, Scitheron spoke to the kuo-toa, and bullywugs, and quaggoths, and the others, and then returned. “They are impressed by your ferocity. While some hate humans, they hate the derro who enslaved them far more, and say they would rather hurt them than you. They wonder, would it be all right if they tried to kill the rest of the derro, or do you demand that pleasure yourself?”

“They should do whatever they think is best,” Zaltys said.

“You know, they aren’t family,” Alaia said. “And they might turn on us. You don’t owe them freedom.”

“No one should be a slave,” Zaltys said. “To anyone.” Julen helped her strike open the cages with clubs made of bone, and most of the slaves—the ones who weren’t drugged—emerged, some tending to their sick, others racing toward the settlement. None tried to attack Zaltys—indeed, they seemed afraid of her. But she *had* helped kill the Slime King. Did that make her a liberator, or was she herself the

Slime King now? Ascension by assassination seemed likely to be the derro way. If so, she didn't want the title.

The pale serpent still writhed impatiently, so Zaltys lifted her pack—only to have one of the yuan-ti who had legs take it from her wordlessly and strap it on his back. She nodded her thanks, and the creature nodded back, its black inhuman eyes impossible to read. One of the other yuan-ti handed her a clutch of her spent arrows that he'd retrieved. Treacherous murderous evil chaotic adherents of Zehir—perhaps. But capable, it seemed, of performing acts of simple gratitude.

“Let's leave this place,” Zaltys said, and they followed the slithering snake on its long and winding journey back out of the Underdark, the screams of the slaves attacking the settlement receding gradually behind them.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

WHY AREN'T THE LABORERS OFF ... LABORING?" GLORY said, frowning at the unruly camp as she emerged from her wagon. People were running to and fro, shouting, or standing around like old statues, or chattering excitedly in little clumps.

"I told them not to bother," Quelamia said, squatting in the dirt—she even managed to squat regally—near her own wagon. "The terazul flowers are all dead. This enterprise is over. Everyone will be going home soon." The eladrin wizard didn't seem particularly bothered by the turn of events, but Glory just stood there, stunned.

"The flowers are dead? What happened?"

Quelamia was methodically stripping bark from a small tree branch. "Order has been restored, at some cost, though the damage already done cannot be undone easily. But time will correct the worst of them, as the ones tainted by the terazul potions live out their normal spans and die. If a portal had opened in Delzimmer, and some of the old creatures from beyond had emerged into the city, those addicts who had ingested the flowers of the Far Realm may have found themselves turned instantly into zealous cultists. Or they might simply have gone mad and attacked everyone around them. Or the effects could have been stranger—perhaps the addicts would have sprouted pseudopods or developed horrible psionic powers and attendant manias. Who can say? But now all the flowers we've plucked this year have turned to dust, and the potions and powders for sale by the Traders may well have lost their potency as well, as the connection to their true source has been severed. The job is done, and any collaborations along the way can be safely forgotten." Quelamia rose with her stripped-bare twig and gestured at her living wagon with it.

The wheels fell off, and the platform holding the tree dropped a few feet to the ground. The tree settled into the earth as if it had been there forever, suddenly just a part of the landscape, smaller than the surrounding trees, but not otherwise noticeably out of place. The leaves and bark were different from the other trees in the jungle in some way Glory couldn't immediately articulate, since her sum total knowledge of trees was limited to the fact that some shed their leaves in the autumn while others had needles.

"Farewell, tiefling," Quelamia said. "You have full authority over the camp, but don't worry—it won't be for long."

"Wait wait wait. You're *going*?"

Quelamia nodded. "My true mission here has been accomplished. And my ostensible mission, to serve Travelers of the Serrat family, is irrelevant, as the Travelers no longer serve any purpose. So I will go, yes."

"You'd better tell me what in the blasted ruins of Mulhorand is going on here." Glory crossed her arms. "I'm tired of the cryptic I'm-a-million-year-old-feything routine. I want answers, and if you don't give them to me, I'll take them."

Quelamia cocked her head. "There's no reason it can't be told, though I'm not inclined to stay here and do the telling. The Serrats may be wroth about my role in this, and though they pose no threat to me, I don't relish conflict, so I had best be going. Yes, I think it's better if you take the answers. Reach into my mind, then. I have something to show you." The wizard took Glory's warm hands in her own cool ones, and opened her mind.

Glory was used to slipping in through cracks in automatic mental defenses, but going into the eladrin's mind was like strolling in through an open door—though she got the sense that openness would extend only to the one particular room of her mind that Quelamia *wanted* her to see. The room was actually the size of all outdoors, specifically the jungle, specifically at night. Dark trees

crowded in from the sides, and in the center, there was a ruined plaza, and Quelamia sat cross-legged on the stones.

This is fifteen years past, Quelamia whispered into Glory's mind, which was quite a trick, since Glory was inside *her* mind.

A figure emerged from the trees, cloaked in a garment of dust and shadows, and sat cross-legged across from Quelamia on the ground. "Eladrin," it said, voice a whisper.

"God," Quelamia said, nodding as if greeting an equal. "You may call me Quelamia."

"You may call me the Serpent Lord, Master of Poisons and Shadows, Keeper of Secrets and Teller of—"

"I will call you Zehir, if you don't mind." Quelamia was polite. "The full list of honorifics would be rather time consuming, and I should get back to camp before I'm missed."

Zehir laughed like a hundred serpents hissing at once. The form underneath the cloak didn't move like a human body at all. "Fair enough. This shouldn't take long. We have certain parallel interests. You want to stop the Slime King of the derro from opening a vast portal to the Far Realm, and to cut off the roots of the poisoned terazul trade."

"And you want to punish the derro for some transgression against you."

"The Slime King was one of my servants once. She betrayed me, and my other followers, and went over to the derro. That was some time ago, as humans reckon the years, but I've only just noticed in the past dozen years or so—I'm a busy god. I'd like to see the traitor's works destroyed and my people freed."

Quelamia nodded. "And you believe you have an instrument in the caravan."

"Zaltys," Zehir said, ending the name in a hiss. "She is only a babe now, but she will grow up, and when she does she should be the

direct cause of the Slime King's downfall. There are certain pleasing symmetries in that arrangement, which you would not appreciate. Zaltys is my chosen one. Shutting off access to the Far Realm would distress the Slime King, but, ah, *reducing* the amount of madness in the world is hardly my area of expertise."

"Fine," Quelamia said briskly. "I can help make sure Zaltys is raised to learn martial skills, and magical and psionic ones, if she shows any aptitude. And I can offer weapons capable of combating the influence of the Far Realm—a shard of the Living Gate, a dagger imbued with the power of the Feywild, perhaps other things. I can give Zaltys the means to achieve what you ask. What will you provide?"

"Guidance through the Underdark, where I'm able. Safe passage, where it's possible. A push in the right direction if things go off course. There are forces in the dark that would stand against me, but I can provide certain advantages, if not overwhelming ones. And of course, I am a god. I can influence events in such a way that Zaltys will *want* to go into the Underdark to rescue my servants. It's remarkable what one can achieve with dreams and visions and whispers. And the odd snake to lead someone out of the dark."

"I trust you will do so subtly," Quelamia said. "If the Serrat family had known that I intended to destroy so much of their livelihood ... if Alaia knew that I had planned to let Zaltys find out what she truly is ..."

"Seeing such treachery in a noble eladrin is a rare and delicious thing," the god said, voice dark with amusement. "Are you sure you don't want to become my worshiper? You wouldn't be the first eladrin to pledge herself to me, though I admit, it's been some time since the last one."

Quelamia turned her face away. "You repulse me. If I could do this on my own, I would, but venturing into the Underdark personally is too perilous for me."

Zehir waved a hand—not that it was *really* a hand—in dismissal. “We have a common enemy in these derro scum and their dabblings in the Far Realm. That doesn’t mean you and I have to stop being enemies.” He rose. “I think we’re done here.”

“How will I know when the time has come for Zaltys to go into the caves?” Quelamia said.

“Oh, you’ll see. I’d hate to spoil the surprise. Let’s just say I’ll send a suitable emissary from the Underdark.”

Quelamia nodded. “I will trust in your ability to scheme and plot, god.”

“As well you should. We won’t meet again—either we’ll succeed, and it won’t be necessary, or we’ll fail, and you’ll probably be dead.” The cloak fell to the ground, and scores of serpents writhed and wriggled out, streaking into the jungle.

“Gods are so dramatic,” Quelamia observed to no one. Then she turned her head, and looked *right at Glory*, which should have been impossible, since Glory was only spying on a memory. “Psion,” she said softly. “I assume you’re watching this. Do tell Alaia I’m sorry, would you? I didn’t mean to trouble her family or destroy her livelihood, any more than a man who cuts down a tree for firewood means to deprive birds of their nests. It is merely an unintended consequence of a necessary act. Now, if you please, I need some privacy.”

Glory opened her eyes and groaned. She was flat on her back on the ground in the shade of the tree that had, a little while ago, been Quelamia’s trailer. She sat up, rubbing the spot between her horns, and looked around for the wizard, but she was gone. Probably long gone, and gone for good.

So all these years Quelamia had been playing a deep game of her own against some adversary in the Underdark, with Zaltys’s heritage part of her endgame. Glory shuddered. People as ancient as Quelamia could be so *cold*. She could have just told the Serrats the true nature of the terazul flowers, but it wouldn’t have helped. Even

if the Serrats had stopped selling them, some other enterprising mortal would have stepped in to get rich. That wasn't an issue anymore. Oh, it was nice that the natural balance had been restored and the monsters from the Far Realm held at bay, but the fact was, with the terazul trade ruined, Glory was almost certainly out of a *job*.

While the chaos of the camp intensified around her, Glory went into her trailer, filled her pipe, and sat puffing thoughtfully. Mostly, she hoped Zaltys was okay. Snake person or not, the girl was all right. And maybe now that she was done being used like a piece on a game board she could become her own person at last.



They had to stop, eventually, to rest; they were all exhausted. They found a little side corridor that seemed easy to defend, and Julen took the first watch, while Alaia and Zaltys and the yuan-ti slept. Julen tried to watch the opening and the yuan-ti too. It was exhausting, and he was glad when Zaltys stirred, said she couldn't sleep, and took over from him, sitting with her back to a cavern wall and her bow in her lap and her eyes looking faraway at nothing.

Julen curled up next to his aunt Alaia and slept, and dreamed, and in the dream, the god Zehir appeared to him, as a serpent with a human face. Such a vision would have terrified him in waking life, but it was a dream, and he knew it was a dream, so he took it in stride.

"Hello, ape," Zehir said. "Did you enjoy your visit to the caverns?"

"No," Julen said. "I can't say I did." Suddenly Julen was in a clearing skinning something—as he'd skinned the shadow snake once—though he couldn't quite tell what he was skinning. He had the vague sense that he was somehow skinning himself.

"Are you happy with the outcome, at least, little Guardian?"

"My family's fortunes have been cut in half," Julen said. "My friend Krailash is dead. Zaltys is ... I can't imagine what she's going

through right now.”

“True,” the man said. “But the derro who transgressed against my people have been punished for their affront. Better still, the traitorous Iraska has been sent to a realm of madness and death. It is strange, ape—I love treachery, but I despise traitors, at least when I’m the one being betrayed. At least I have amused myself for a while, and sowed discord among your family. Do you think they’ll welcome you back, when they find out your part in reducing the family fortunes? The venom you humans generate yourselves, the emotional toxins, are more potent than anything found in the fangs of my serpents.” He paused. “The eladrin wizard got what she wanted too, of course, which is a shame, but you can’t have everything.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Julen said. He was almost done skinning himself. Every breeze was like a jolt of electricity. Perhaps I’m molting, he thought. Like a snake shedding its skin before starting a new life.

“I know,” Zehir—for it was suddenly obvious to Julen this must be Zehir—said. “I know you don’t. It’s pointless coming here. I should talk to Zaltys, but I don’t think she’d be very receptive. But I can’t help gloating and spitting poison at *someone*, even if they’re just nasty words. It’s my nature.”

Julen woke up. The rest of the group stirred, and soon they followed the snake again, up steeply ascending tunnels. Julen fell into step near the front, with Zaltys, and said, “How are you, Cousin?”

“Confused,” she said. “One of the yuan-ti, the one called Scitheron? He crept up to me last night while everyone else was asleep and said he was glad they hadn’t sacrificed me to the anathema like they’d planned. I guess they were going to feed me to a monster, when I was just a baby, because I looked too much like a human. He said my survival was destined, and that I’d proven the nature of that destiny by saving them. He told me he knew I would come to

serve Zehir, and said I should use the power and influence of the Serrat family to cultivate human cultists in Delzimmer, with an eye toward taking over the city. She said I should make a list of enemies we could later sacrifice to the god, and started going on about slow poisons.” She shook her head. “I told him I’d think about it just to get him to go away. It’s pretty much exactly what Iraska wanted me to do.” She paused. “And it’s pretty much what the Serrats have been trying for decades—to take over the whole city, I mean.”

Julen thought for a moment. “Seems to me there’s a difference, though,” he said at last. “The Serrats believe in family. They found you in the jungle and took you in. They never would have fed you to a monster. When children are born simpleminded or sick in this family, we take care of them, make them as comfortable as we can, we don’t *kill* them. Maybe the Serrats are unscrupulous—all right, I’m a Guardian, I *know* we’re unscrupulous—but those yuan-ti are *evil*. And it’s not because serpentfolk are born that way, not because they’re rotten from the start. You’re proof enough of that. They *choose* evil. What the Slime King said, about ‘your nature’ ... I don’t believe it. Nature’s not everything. You may have venom in your veins, Zaltys, but that doesn’t make you a snake.”

“But these yuan-ti are my family too,” she said. “They’re my blood.”

“Am I your family?” Julen said. “Is Alaia? We’re not your blood. We never thought we *were*, we knew from the start you weren’t a Serrat by birth. But that doesn’t change the fact that we’re family. And when a Serrat proves to be unreliable or treacherous, we give them a purse and send them out to make their own way, we don’t sacrifice them to some evil god or enslave them. Blood might give you the color of your hair or your eyes or the length of your stride, you might inherit good teeth or strong arms or quick wits, but family is something you make, at least as much as it’s something you’re born into. And you’ve made yourself something good. Something better than the serpentfolk have chosen to be. Something better than most of the Serrats, I have to say.”

Zaltys put her hand on his shoulder. “You’re a good friend, Julen.”

Ah, we're *friends* then—that old twist of the knife, he thought, loving her more than ever, snake or not.

“And a good cousin. Thank you for coming down here with me. Even though it didn't work out like I expected.”

“I'm not sure life ever does,” he said.



They emerged, blinking, into the afternoon sunlight, not from the ruins where they'd descended, but not terribly far from the caravan, either. The yuan-ti prepared to return to their old home ruins, with Scitheron pausing by Zaltys and asking if she'd return to say good-bye before she left. She promised she would—no reason to antagonize them—then accompanied Julen and Alaia back to the caravan.

Everything there was being packed up for the return trip home, under Glory's supervision. “Welcome back,” she said, obviously noting Krailash's absence, but choosing not to comment on it. “I guess you won?”

Alaia laughed bitterly. “In a way. I've never seen a win bring such ruin. Where's Quelamia?”

Glory sighed. “Ah. Long gone. I guess I should tell you a story. Come on, let's eat some real food and I'll tell you what I know, which isn't much.”

Afterward, Zaltys went to her mother's wagon, and sat down across from her. Alaia looked blankly around at her totems, which had become so many useless knickknacks. “What will you do?” Zaltys said. “When you return to the city?”

Alaia shook her head. “There's nothing for me there. I'd be cut off financially, probably, for coming back empty handed. If the rest of the family find out my part in the end of the terazul trade, they won't be happy. Besides, I'm head of the Travelers, and there's no reason to Travel anymore. I don't think business was the right path for me, truly. If I'm no longer a trade princess, I'd better go about

learning to become a shaman again. I'm going to stay here in the jungle, and try to regain the connection to the primal world I lost. That I gave *up*." She glanced at Zaltys. "Your ... other family. They say they have some interesting shamanic traditions they could share with me, relating to the World Serpent."

"You shouldn't trust them," Zaltys said. "They worship a god of lies and betrayal, and they're always plotting, believe me."

"Trust them? Zaltys, darling, I was a ranking member of the Serrat family. I know more about lies and betrayal and plotting than a bunch of snake cultists ever could." She put her hand on Zaltys's knee, but didn't look her in the eye. "I'm sorry I kept that secret from you. I wanted you to have an ordinary life—or, rather, an extraordinarily *good* life. I thought knowing your true origins would cause you pain. But do you remember at your initiation, when I said you should speak to me, later, to learn a family secret? I was going to tell you the secret of *your* family, and your true nature. Please believe that."

"I do. I was happier before I knew," Zaltys admitted. "And when I was a child, it made sense to keep it from me. But I'm grown up now. It's time I knew the truth. I just have to figure out what to *do* with that truth."

"Will you go back to Delzimmer? I could send a letter, and make sure the disgrace falls squarely on me, leaving you blameless."

But Zaltys was shaking her head. "I never felt entirely at home there anyway. The Travelers were always a breed apart. And knowing how much I *really* don't belong there now ... Besides, it's possible Zehir will keep trying to use me. I'd rather not give him the chance. I think ... I think I'll travel. See what's across the gulf, or to the north. Delzimmer is near the bottom edge of every map I've ever seen—there must be so much more out there."

"The world is a large and dangerous place," Alaia said. "Wherever you go, my daughter, my darling daughter, please, be safe."

Zaltys tapped the psychic ring on her finger. “I’ll send you messages and let you know how I’m doing. All right?”

Alaia kissed her cheek. “Loot the camp for any supplies you need,” she said. “Otherwise the Traders will just auction everything off to make up the income lost on this expedition.”



Zaltys tried to slip away unnoticed, but Glory and Julen were both waiting on the edge of camp, holding packs—though Glory didn’t look happy about it.

“You don’t have to do this,” Zaltys said. “You still have a place in the world, but I ... I don’t. I don’t belong with the yuan-ti, and I don’t belong with the humans. I’m not sure *where* I belong, but I need to find my own way. I—”

Julen said, “Quiet, Cousin. Of course I’m coming with you. Sure, I’m seventh in line to run the Guardians, and that’s a wonderful job, but they’re planning on making me an underground operative—*literally* underground, dealing with dwarves and such. I’ve spent enough time in the Underdark to decide that’s not the career path for me. I don’t even want to go into a *basement* for a while. Besides, I’ve found life with you a lot more interesting. And with Glory along we’ll never have to worry about whether we can afford to stay at an inn or not.”

“Life of adventure, here I come,” Glory said sourly. “I’m not promising to wander the earth with you forever, but I think things are going to get ugly in Delzimmer—hundreds of terazul addicts denied their life’s only purpose? No fun, and I’d rather not be there when they start rioting in the streets. Even if I make sure they can’t see me, I might get trampled accidentally. So I’ll stick with you until I find a better situation. Okay?”

“The two of you,” she said. They were rather spoiling her plan to walk off nobly into the woods alone to find herself and seek her fortune, but she had to admit—she’d enjoy the company, and it was

easier to stay alive in the jungle and beyond if you had someone to keep watch while you were sleeping. “I don’t know what to say.”

“You don’t have to say anything,” Julen said. “We already know. That’s the whole point of being family.”

“Speak for yourself,” Glory said. “We’re not family. I’m just going along with you so I don’t have to dig my own holes to crap in.”



Zaltys asked them to wait for her near the severed head of the idol where they’d skinned the shadow snake while she said her good-byes to the yuan-ti. Scitheron begged her to reconsider—he offered to make her low priest, which was apparently a kind of high priest—and she politely declined. “Listen,” she said. “There’s a pit, with a stone grate over it ... Can you tell me about it?”

“The pit of the anathema,” Scitheron said. His tongue flickered wildly. “We haven’t been there yet. We weren’t sure if the anathema still lived.”

“It was alive a few days ago,” Zaltys said. “It spoke to me.”

“Are you *sure* you won’t become our low priest?” Scitheron said again. “The anathema is a sort of king, and a sort of representative of our god. But it went mad, long ago, and slew most of our people. We kept the anathema locked away, and fed it sacrifices to placate it. It is a great power, to be honored and respected, but it is also very dangerous.”

“It speaks to your god, though, right?”

Scitheron nodded. “You wish to commune with Zehir?” He sounded so excited, like the more devout aunts in the Traders did whenever she showed the slightest interest in Waukeen, the god worshiped by most of the Serrat family.

“I have a message for him,” Zaltys said carefully.

Scitheron showed her to the pit, though Zaltys remembered the way. “Don’t open the trapdoor,” he warned. “Speak through the

grate. It can hear you, though it may not answer.” He bid her good luck and slithered away.

Zaltys kneeled by the edge of the pit. “Anathema,” she said.

“Daughter of serpents,” the thing in the pit whispered. “You have returned. Did you save our people?”

“I did,” Zaltys said.

“Then I will be fed soon. Good. Would you like to be my first meal? Being eaten by the anathema is a great honor.”

“No. But I have a message for Zehir.”

“Speak, then. The god hears what I hear.”

Zaltys spoke at some length. She’d learned most of the fouler words from the guardsmen in the caravan, and she ended with a rather forceful and graphic suggestion that she sincerely hoped Zehir would follow.

The anathema chuckled. “I am not sure that act is physically possible,” the anathema said, “even for a god as mutable in shape as Zehir. But your anger will delight him, Zaltys. You are truly his daughter.”

Zaltys spat into the pit, and the anathema laughed as she walked away.



Julen, Glory, and Zaltys set off into the jungle, carrying rations and water and potions and everything else useful they could find in the camp. Julen had a map of the lands north of Delzimmer, and at the upper edge was a place marked Tymanther, where Krailash supposedly had family. Zaltys thought it would be nice to let them know he’d died heroically saving the world, or at least a small portion of it.

“There’s no sense of scale on this map, though,” Glory said, turning the sheet of parchment over and peering at it upside down. “I have no idea how long the journey might take us. A few tendays to reach

Delzimmer—though it might be best if we swing wide around the city, lest your relatives get their hands on you and lock you up in a tower somewhere. After that, though, there are just *leagues* and *leagues* to cover. And there's no telling what we'll run into along the way."

"I know," Julen said. "Back home, I'd be taking Advanced Poisons class right now, and then spending two hours practicing my knife work, and then reading classics. But now, I have *no idea* what's going to happen next. It's amazingly liberating."

Glory looked at Zaltys and shook her head. "Humans," she said. "They're impossible."

"Yes," Zaltys agreed. "But what can we do? He's family." They set off into the green vastness of the jungle.

As they passed under the low-hanging branches, a pale green serpent slithered behind them in Zaltys's shadow.

She pretended not to notice.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Sincere thanks to my editor Fleetwood Robbins for giving me the chance to write an adventure set in a world I love; my agent Ginger Clark for helping make it happen; my wife Heather Shaw for giving me time and space to write; Jenn Reese and Chris East for letting me hole up in their guest room for a week as I pushed through to finish the first draft; David Moles for his excellent criticism and suggestions; and my old D&D-playing friends from high school: Millard Arnold IV, Bobby McArthur, and Matt Lane.

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Tim Pratt began playing AD&D with friends in high school, and soon ended up running a vast campaign that liberally borrowed from various D&D settings, comics, and science fiction. In recent years he's sublimated his urge to run games into writing fiction, though writing fiction is a lot lonelier. He's won a Hugo Award for his fiction writing, and been a finalist for World Fantasy, Stoker, Sturgeon, Mythopoeic, and Nebula Awards. He also publishes an urban fantasy series as T.A. Pratt. Visit his website at timpratt.org.

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